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Last Stops Before Vṛndāvana

September 16–October 8, 2001

Because of the threat of war in Afghanistan and unrest in the surrounding region, I decided to postpone my trip to India until the situation cleared. Instead, I flew to the United States to visit one or two temples and associate with several godbrothers. My flight out of London was one of the first to cross the Atlantic Ocean after the five-day government-imposed ban on international flights into the U.S. following the terrorist attacks in New York City and Washington, D.C. Our flight was delayed two hours because security at London's Heathrow Airport treated each passenger as a potential terrorist and searched them three times before they were allowed to board. The passengers on my flight were tense. I was seated next to an African woman, who began to shake uncontrollably just before take-off. I called an airhostess over, who asked me to leave my seat while she spoke to the woman. When the airhostess left I returned and asked the woman if she felt better. She said, "They know why I'm nervous, but they won't let me tell anyone."

To allay her fears I said, "It's okay, you can tell me the problem. After all, we'll be sitting next to one another for the next twelve hours."

Leaning over, she whispered softly, "Two Arabs tried to hijack the British Airways flight I was on from Nairobi to London yesterday. They came aboard just before we left, pulled out guns, and threatened to kill us. Several men wrestled them to the ground. Minutes later the police arrived and took them away. The cabin crew on this flight asked me not to mention the incident to anyone, but I'm terrified!"

I told the woman that this world is a dangerous place, but if we are conscious of God and pray for His shelter, He will protect us. Seeing me fingering my *japa* beads she asked, "Is that what you're doing there?"

"Yes," I replied. "I'm chanting God's names."

She asked if she could listen.

“Of course.” I began to chant louder. She gradually calmed, and by the time the flight took off, she had become peaceful.

An hour later she turned to me and said, “Your prayers are powerful. Can you teach them to me?” I then taught her the words to the *mahā-mantra*, which she carefully noted on a piece of paper.

As our flight was landing in San Diego, California twelve hours later, I watched as she took the paper from her purse and softly chanted the *mahā-mantra* to herself. Observing her newfound faith in Kṛṣṇa’s holy name reminded me of my own experiences when I first began to chant Hare Kṛṣṇa thirty-two years ago. Although I knew little or nothing about the holy name’s glories, chanting quickly awakened in me a keen interest in spiritual life. My awakening has sometimes reminded me of Nārada Muni’s amazing experience recorded in *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam*, where he became interested in Kṛṣṇa consciousness after only one bite of *prasādam* received from merciful devotees.

*ucchiṣṭa-lepān anumodito dvijaiḥ
sakiṛt sma bhuiṅje tad-apāsta-kilbiṣaḥ
evam pravṛttasya viśuddha-cetasas
tad-dharma evātma-ruciḥ prajāyate*

“Once only, by their permission, I took the remnants of their food, and by so doing all my sins were at once eradicated. Thus being engaged, I became purified in heart, and at that time the very nature of the transcendentalist became attractive to me.” (*Bhāg.* 1.5.25)

Seeing the distraught woman’s faith in the holy name increased my own desire to chant and to continue to seek new realizations in service to the holy name.

My son Gaura-śakti met me at the San Diego airport and drove me to his home to rest. His wife had recently given birth to a baby girl, whom they had named Amara-keli. One evening Gaura and I were reminiscing about his own growing up. He expressed his disappointment that he had

been born too late to have met Śrīla Prabhupāda. He was pleasantly surprised when I told him that he had in fact received Śrīla Prabhupāda's mercy through a personal exchange they had had when he was barely twelve months old.

During the summer of 1974, Śrīla Prabhupāda was visiting the New Māyāpur community in France. One afternoon I was walking around the Chateau, carrying Gaura on my shoulders. I didn't notice it at first, but Śrīla Prabhupāda was watching us from his window. When Gaura saw Prabhupāda, he waved his arms and kicked his legs, eagerly calling the only word he knew: "Prabhupāda! Prabhupāda! Prabhupāda!" Seeing his enthusiasm, Prabhupāda's eyes widened and he waved at Gaura, causing the boy to become so excited that he almost fell off my shoulders.

Prabhupāda referred to the incident that night while talking to the devotees. "Today one young boy become so excited when he saw me that it was as if we were old friends!"

After a few day's rest in San Diego, Gaura drove me north to the Laguna Beach temple, where I planned to stay for a few days. On the way, we stopped at a roadside stall next to a farm to buy fruits and vegetables. As Gaura was choosing the items, I noticed the woman who owned the farm watching me as I paced back and forth, chanting *japa*. Gaura took his time, and in the end brought a large supply of vegetables up to the cash register. The woman totaled his purchase. It came to \$120. As Gaura reached for his wallet, the woman said, "Take it for free. These fruits and vegetables are a gift for the man you're with."

Surprised, Gaura told her, "That's my father!"

"I've been watching him. The world needs more people like him."

I was embarrassed by her remarks, which caused a number of other shoppers to look at me. I realized that the recent events in New York had made Americans more God conscious and respectful of spiritual values. In the few days I had been in the United States, a number of people had approached me, asking me to explain why such terrible things had happened. I usually receive such philosophical inquiries only when I am visiting world trouble spots such as Bosnia, Croatia, Serbia, or the Muslim repub-

lics of the former Soviet Union. Suddenly Americans are inquiring about the temporary and miserable nature of this world and searching for positive alternatives.

I wonder if their interest can last? Material nature easily covers whatever minute spiritual knowledge we glean. The scriptures call this *śmaśāna vairāgya*, the detachment we feel when we attend funerals. Such detachment tends to disappear as soon as we leave the crematorium and again take up our activities.

It's unfortunate that it often takes tragedy to awaken us to our existential purpose. People tend to be more pious when they are distressed. Haridāsa Ṭhākura once explained this while sharing a prison cell with criminals. Knowing a saint's ability to bestow mercy, several criminals approached Haridāsa Ṭhākura and asked, "O great *sādbu*, please give us the blessing that we may quickly be released from this miserable place!"

Haridāsa Ṭhākura replied, "My blessings are that you remain in this prison cell for many years to come."

The prisoners were shocked. "Dear *sādbu*, what kind of blessing is that?"

Haridāsa Ṭhākura replied, "I have given you this blessing because you are usually disrespectful to saintly persons. Being in such a miserable condition now has humbled you and made you respectful to *sādbus*. Now you have a good opportunity to attain spiritual emancipation. Better, then, that you remain in this miserable condition for as long as possible."

In Laguna Beach I had the opportunity to thank Tukarāma Prabhu, the temple president, for all the help he gave the Polish tour over the past year. He organized our fundraising drive in the United States last spring, and the money he collected gave us the opportunity to hold the festivals for a full five months.

In Laguna Beach, the Lord also instructed me in an unusual way. One evening as I sat in my room, I overheard the *brahmacārīs* in the next room comparing the classes of several *sannyāsīs* who had recently visited. When my name was mentioned, there was a brief pause, and then one *brahmacārī* said, "I like his classes, but he's not very erudite." The boy's words pierced

my heart, but I managed to swallow my pride and admit that had I put as much time into studying Prabhupāda's books as I had into preaching, the boy might have been able to speak differently. How do we find the balance between *bbajana* and preaching? The boy's words deepened my resolve to focus on hearing and chanting when I went to Vṛndāvana.

Just after this incident, Tukarāma entered my room and asked me to give the Sunday feast lecture. I hesitated, still stung by the *brahmacāri's* words, and then agreed. By the time I went downstairs to lecture, the temple room was packed with both devotees and guests. Preaching to nondevotees comes easily to me—I've been doing it for most of my devotional life—so feeling relaxed and confident I presented the basic Kṛṣṇa conscious philosophy, quoted verses, and told simple stories to illustrate my points.

Afterwards, Tukarāma told me that it was the best Sunday feast lecture he had ever attended. His words eased the pain of my not being “erudite.” This back-to-back condemnation and praise reminded me of Śrīla Prabhupāda's advice to the *gurukula* teachers in Dallas: a good teacher knows the art of reprimand and encouragement. If a child makes a mistake, the teacher should first reprimand him, then quickly smother him with love and attention. On this occasion Kṛṣṇa scolded me for neglecting my study, then quickly embraced me through Tukarāma's kind words.

From Laguna Beach I traveled north to the home of my dear godbrother, Girirāja Mahārāja, who is still recovering from the major heart surgery he underwent about two years ago. Mahārāja is one of my closest friends, and I look to him for inspiration. I am especially inspired by his deep love for Śrīla Prabhupāda. I also admire his unique ability to draw from memory personal stories about Prabhupāda to illustrate the philosophical points he makes while preaching. Girirāja Swami merits the most prestigious title any ISKCON devotee can achieve: he is a “Prabhupāda man.”

On October 1 I flew to London and caught a connecting flight to Moscow. The next morning, I flew with my disciple Jananivāsa to Dinamorsk in southern Russia to attend a festival for devotees. During the flight we were seated next to a Russian army officer. He had recently returned from

fighting guerrillas in Chechnya. The officer observed us in silence for some time, and then exclaimed, “I am sorry that I killed so many men in the war.” A discussion ensued, during which Jananivāsa explained the law of karma and how suffering is caused by our past impious deeds. With me coaching, he told how we can become free from karma by engaging in devotional service to God. The officer listened carefully, and at the end of Jananivāsa’s discourse, thanked us for the knowledge he had received.

Dinamorsk is a resort town on the Black Sea coast. The festival there had attracted three thousand devotees and twelve *sannyāsīs*. I was so jet-lagged, though, that I missed much association and a number of seminars. Still, I made it a point to spend time with the children who had come to the festival to see me. Every morning, thirty of us walked along the beach as I told them stories of my travels and listened to the problems they are experiencing as they grow up. Helping ISKCON’s children and inspiring them in their Kṛṣṇa consciousness is another thing I like to do, perhaps because I saw what a lasting effect Śrīla Prabhupāda’s mercy had on my own son when he was young.

But during the relaxing days in Dinamorsk, I found myself thinking more and more about my upcoming Vṛndāvana pilgrimage. I know I will soon have to meet the challenge of self-discipline as I sit and study for hours a day. I have already decided to reduce my eating and sleeping while I’m there so I can spend a maximum amount of time hearing and chanting. I also plan to decrease my social life. This comes easily for some devotees, but such an austere lifestyle may prove challenging for someone like me. I’m accustomed to always being on the move, surrounded by people. I pray I will succeed. I have a vision of giving class to the young *brahmacārīs* at the Laguna Beach temple, Sanskrit verses flowing easily off my tongue as I elaborate on Prabhupāda’s purports. I am using numerous analogies and citing commentaries by the previous *ācāryas*. All of this will be the fruit of months of disciplined study, time well spent in the holy abode of Vṛndāvana, watered by the critique of an unknowing boy. The moment of change is at hand, because I leave for the sacred *dhāma* in twenty-four hours.

“If people criticize me, what is that? If I become the poorest of the poor, barely able to eke out a living for my family, what is that? If all calam-

ities befall me, what is that? If I do not serve the Supreme Personality of Godhead, what is that? I will patiently remain in Śrī Vṛndāvana. My greatest desire will be fulfilled.

“Dressed in a *kaupīna* and *kanthā*, living by eating fruit fallen from the trees, not speaking useless words, not passing time in useless deeds, abandoning all pride, going to each house to beg a little alms, and following those for whom Śrī Rādhikā is their entire life, I will live in Vṛndāvana.”
(Śrī Vṛndāvana-mahimāmṛta, Śataka 1, texts 64–65)

2

Far from the World's Woes

October 9–25

O brother! When you close your eyes in death, where will your loving wife, children, brothers, and relatives be? Where will your good qualities be? Where will your fame be? Where will your pride, wealth, education, control over others, powers, and opulence be? O learned and intelligent friend! Why do you not renounce these things and run to Vṛndāvana?” (*Vṛndāvana-mahimāmṛta*, Śataka 1, text 81)

I have been deluged by e-mails, phone calls, and faxes warning, advising, and even pleading with me not to go to India. The devotees are afraid of possible terrorist attacks and the developing tensions between India and Pakistan. Many of their arguments are logical, but yesterday morning I came across a relevant purport in the *Bhāgavatam*. Reading Prabhupāda’s clear advice convinced me to go.

Sometimes the members of the Kṛṣṇa Consciousness Society are afraid of the impending danger of world war and ask what would happen to them if a war should occur. In all kinds of danger, they should be confident of their protection by the Viṣṇudūtas or the Supreme Personality of Godhead, as confirmed in *Bhagavad-gītā* (*kaunteya pratijānīhi na me bhaktaḥ praṇaśyati*). Material danger is not meant for devotees. This is also confirmed in *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam*. *Padam padam yad vipadām na teṣām*: in this material world there are dangers at every step, but they are not meant for devotees who have fully surrendered unto the lotus feet of the Lord. The pure devotees of Lord Viṣṇu may rest assured of the Lord’s protection, and as long as they are in this material world they should fully engage in devotional service by preaching the cult of Śrī Caitanya Mahāprabhu and Lord Kṛṣṇa, namely the Hare Kṛṣṇa movement of Kṛṣṇa consciousness.

—*Bhāg.* 6.3.18, purport

On October 8 I flew from Warsaw to New Delhi with Śrī Prahlāda and his wife, Rukmiṇī-priyā dāsī. After a brief stopover in Vienna, we were the first passengers to reboard the airplane. It was a full flight, so I settled into my seat and watched the other passengers board, curious to see who might sit beside me for the nine-hour journey. I noticed one woman, who appeared extremely nervous, coming down the aisle. Upon seeing me, she seemed to calm herself, and then appeared relieved when she discovered that her seat was next to mine. We exchanged a few pleasantries, but otherwise did not speak during the flight.

Nine hours later as we landed in Delhi and were preparing to deplane, the woman asked, “Can I share something with you?”

“Of course.”

“I have a phobia about flying, which has increased due to the recent terrorist attacks in America. I was anxious as I boarded the flight, but when I saw you, a monk, I prayed to God, ‘Please, Lord, let me sit near him and everything will be all right.’ And it was! Thank you for being my guardian angel.”

Surprised, I managed only a “You’re welcome” as we joined the flow of passengers leaving the plane.

As we were walking down the stairs to Immigration and Customs, a man and his wife stopped me and also thanked me. Amused, I asked, “For what?”

“For being on that flight,” the man said, and they walked on. Again I saw how nervous people had become due to the terrorist attacks, and how ready they were to appreciate the shelter spiritual life offers.

It was well after midnight by the time we cleared customs. As soon as we were through, we left for Vṛndāvana in a Tata Sumo van. I knew we had at least two hours to go before arriving in the *dhāma*, but I was so excited I couldn’t sleep. I found myself counting the minutes until our arrival.

We pulled in at 4:00 A.M. Even at that hour Vṛndāvana bustles with activity. Unlike Westerners, most Brijbasis are up before sunrise either on their way to one of the seven thousand temples or simply to begin the day’s work. As we stepped out of the van, the sweet smell of night-blooming jas-

mine enlivened my senses, and I could hear the sound of ringing bells. Only the humidity was unpleasant. I was drenched in perspiration within moments.

But I am not complaining. I have been to India many times and am familiar with the heat and cold, the simple food, the crowded streets, the occasional loss of electricity, and how difficult it can be sometimes to get water. These austerities afford little opportunity for sense gratification and ultimately serve to make us callous toward material existence. Among other things, visiting a holy place allows us to perform austerity and decrease our bodily demands. Kṛṣṇa says clearly in *Bhagavad-gītā* (18.67):

*idaṁ te nātapaskāya
nābhaktāya kadācana
na cāśūśrūṣave vācyaṁ
na ca mām yo 'bhyasūyati*

“This confidential knowledge may never be explained to those who are not austere, or devoted, or engaged in devotional service, nor to one who is envious of Me.”

Of course, the rewards of visiting as wonderfully auspicious a place as Vṛndāvana far outweigh the austerities we have to perform while we are there! The benefits of devotional service performed in the land of Vṛndāvana are magnified one thousand times. And Vṛndāvana is so beautiful. Śrīla Prabhupāda describes Vṛndāvana’s beauty in his *Kṛṣṇa* book. One brief passage in particular has, for me, always captured the essence of this transcendental land: “Vṛndāvana is such a nice place. Flowers are always blooming, and there are even various kinds of decorated deer. Birds are chirping, peacocks are crowing and dancing, and bees are humming. The cuckoos there sing nicely in five kinds of tunes.”

After settling in, I visited the Krishna-Balaram Mandir and Śrīla Prabhupāda’s *samādhi*, then took a long walk through Vṛndāvana. I felt carefree and happy as I visited the various temples. This was the moment I had been

anticipating for so long. I often thought of Vṛndāvana during the Polish festival tour and had mentally visited a number of holy places. Such meditation relieves me from the pressure of the constant opposition we face in Poland and provides divine inspiration. Now walking the streets of Vraja, I realized that while it helps to meditate on Vṛndāvana from a distance, regularly taking *darśana* of the holy sites is what gives me the strength to go on in devotional service year after year.

On this, my first day, I wanted to make it a point to visit the five personalities that bestow the greatest mercy upon aspiring devotees in the holy *dhāma*: Gopīśvara-mahādeva (Lord Śiva), Vṛndādevī, Yogamāyā, the Yamunā River, and Govardhana Hill. I prayed to each of them that my stay in Vṛndāvana would be transcendently fruitful.

I also met many old friends as I walked, including temple *pūjārīs*, shopkeepers, *sādbus*, and rickshaw wallas. What impressed me most in these encounters is that in each case, we simply talked about Kṛṣṇa consciousness. The *pūjārīs* told me of the outfits the Lord had worn during the recent hot season, the shopkeepers talked about the festivals they had observed, the *sādbus* spoke of the Lord himself, and the rickshaw *wallas*—well, they bargained for higher prices. All of it was music to my ears. Nowhere did I hear about terrorism, which is all that’s being discussed everywhere else in the world. Although the threat of evil is real, because of advancements in information technology, the world is now able to focus on a single event in human history. Like all world events large or small, however, the war on terrorism will come and go no matter how many people are aware of it. In the meantime, we are losing valuable time. We should be using that time to inquire about eternal, spiritual matters.

We have to take mundane news in small doses if we don’t want to become preoccupied with it and become uncertain and afraid. Devotees should give more time to *śāstra* than to the newspaper. Śrīla Prabhupāda was clear on this point: “Caitanya Mahāprabhu has advised, *grāma-kathā nā śunibe, bhāla nā khāibe nā bhāla nā paribe*—don’t indulge in *grāmya-kathā* [village talk]. Therefore we always advise, ‘Don’t read newspaper. Don’t read any other book,’ because it is full of *grāmya-kathā*. Avoid it as far as possible. There is no need. What is the news of a *grāmya-kathā* newspaper?”

The same thing repeated. ‘Here there is flood, where there is train disaster, where there is accident, where one politician is giving speech, another politician is giving speech.’ This externally very attractive news—we should avoid it completely. We shall simply talk of Kṛṣṇa. That is the safest method.” (Lecture, September 1, 1975)

The beauty of Vṛndāvana is that the “village talk” is mostly about Kṛṣṇa. Of course, if we remain determined to hear news of the outside world even while in Vraja, we can tune into the BBC on the radio. There are also plenty of newspapers available in Vṛndāvana.

But Śrīla Prabhupāda explains that meeting saintly persons in the *dhāma* is the purpose of pilgrimage; the saintly persons living in the *dhāma* are as important as the *dhāma* itself. We shouldn’t waste our time discussing mundane news with them. During my first few days in Vṛndāvana, I was fortunate to meet a number of Kṛṣṇa conscious persons in unexpected ways. For example, while performing Govardhana *parikrama* with a small group of devotees, I visited the Dauji temple, which is not far from Govinda-kuṇḍa. As our party entered the temple, an eleven-year-old girl encouraged us to come forward to see the Deity. After offering our obeisances, we sat before the Deity, marveling at His transcendental form. Noticing that the girl was carefully observing us, I spoke to her through my disciple, Dauji Kṛṣṇa dāsī.

I asked, “Do you live here?”

Looking fondly at the Deity she replied, “Yes, my father is the priest here and I help him worship the Deity before I go to school. Every morning I bathe the Lord, then serve Him *prasādam*.”

I was impressed. “What do you want to be when you grow up?”

“I will do whatever Dauji desires. We are not independent—we cannot do anything without His sanction.”

Amazed that such a young girl had so much devotion for the Deity, I continued, “Do you want to live in this village all your life?”

“Yes, of course. I never want to leave Vṛndāvana. This is where Kṛṣṇa and Balarāma play.”

By this time, I was not only impressed but embarrassed. This girl was displaying so much natural affection for the Deity and the spiritual land of

Vraja that it seemed disproportionate. After all, although I have been practicing Kṛṣṇa consciousness for thirty-one years, I still struggle to muster sincere sentiment for the Lord. This young girl's love for Kṛṣṇa seemed spontaneous and natural.

“Would you like to visit America?” I blurted.

“Why would I want to go to America? If it were so nice there, why have you spent so much money to come to Vṛndāvana?” Then answering her own question she said, “Because Dauji is here, and He's the most attractive person.”

I wondered, “Who is this little girl?” Then I remembered Jesus Christ's words: “And a little child shall lead them.” This girl won my heart completely by her response. Recognizing her as a real devotee, I asked her if she needed anything for her service.

“I'd like a book from which I can learn English so that when foreigners come I can tell them everything about Kṛṣṇa.”

“Is that all you want?” I asked.

Instead of replying, she simply raised her gaze to Dauji. I thought, “Of course she doesn't want anything more. She has everything here. She has Kṛṣṇa. I hope in my short stay in Vṛndāvana that I can obtain just a little of the devotion she has for the Lord.”

As she continued to look at the Deity, we quietly offered our obeisances and left. The hair on my body was standing on end. That little Brijbasi girl was no ordinary soul. Does it matter that she has never heard of the world's woes? “I pray that I may engage in the service of the moving and nonmoving residents of Vṛndāvana. What are Brahmā and the other demigods in comparison to them? The residents of Vṛndāvana are more glorious. They are very dear to Vraja's king. Their forms are eternal, spiritual, and full of nectar. Their glories are limitless. They are the roots that sprout into the bliss of the *Upaniṣads*.”

“Don't do anything! Don't say anything! Forget everything you've seen! Remember the fair and dark couple that pains Kāmadeva, flee the common people, and go to transcendental Vṛndāvana!” (*Vṛndāvanamabimāmrta*, Śataka 1, texts 61 and 32)

3

A Lesson Taught by a Child

October 25–November 4

The auspicious month of Kārttika, which began on November 1, is attracting pilgrims from all over India to Vṛndāvana. Unfortunately, few ISKCON devotees have come due to the threat of terrorism. Vṛndāvana is therefore relatively quiet now, and in such a tranquil environment it is easier to fix my mind on hearing and chanting.

I must admit, though, that even with fewer ISKCON devotees here, I haven't found it easy to discipline myself to the rigors of increased chanting and hours-long studying and learning verses. The mind is a muscle; if we don't use it in particular ways, it can atrophy. Then we have to gradually build up its strength so that we can sit and hear comfortably for long periods of time. Only after days of practice have I again developed a taste for hearing *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* and *Caitanya-caritāmṛta*. Now each morning I wake up looking forward to absorbing myself in the nectar of these two beautiful scriptures and I wonder how I have managed to go on for so long over this past year without absorbing myself in them. I know I have been busy with other service, but I pray that when I leave Vṛndāvana in mid-December, I will continue to find time in my schedule to study for one or two hours a day. I would at least like to follow Cāṇakya Paṇḍita's advice to all aspiring transcendentalists: "Let not a single day pass without your learning a verse, a half a verse, a fourth of it, or even one letter of it; nor without attending to charity, study, and other pious activity." (*Niti-śāstra*, Chapter 2, verse 13)

Late in the afternoons I try to visit one or two *tirthas* for additional inspiration. As a result, I now have a fairly good idea where many of Vraja's sacred spots are located. By tagging along with my godbrother Dīnabandhu Prabhu, who has been taking devotees on pilgrimage for years, I'm also gradually learning about the pastimes connected with each place. It is

important to become familiar with Vṛndāvana’s holy *tīrthas*, because we seek to enter this abode when we leave our mortal bodies. If we do not know, constantly remember, and most importantly, develop attachment for Kṛṣṇa’s Vṛndāvana pastimes, what will inspire us to ascend to Vraja at the time of death?

Kṛṣṇa reveals some of the secrets of the spiritual sky in *Bhagavad-gītā*:

*na tad bhāsayate sūryo
na śaśāṅko na pāvakaḥ
yad gatvā na nivartante
tad dhāma paramaṁ mama*

“That supreme abode of Mine is not illumined by the sun or moon, nor by fire or electricity. Those who reach it never return to this material world.” (Bg. 15.6)

In his purport to this verse, Prabhupāda states, “One should be captivated by this information. He should desire to transfer himself to that eternal world and extricate himself from this false reflection of reality. For one who is too much attached to this material world, it is very difficult to cut that attachment, but if he takes to Kṛṣṇa consciousness there is a chance of gradually becoming detached.”

When several devotees from the Polish festival tour, including Varanāyaka, Jayatām, Nandini, Rādhā-sakhī-vṛndā, and Rasamayī arrived in Vṛndāvana, I requested Dīna-bandhu to escort us on several *parikramas*. He took us first to Badarikāśrama, which is located in a remote corner of Vṛndāvana close to the Rajasthan border. Of course, the original Badarikāśrama is high in the Himalayas, but Dīna-bandhu explained that by Kṛṣṇa’s mercy, all the holy places in India are simultaneously located in Vraja. For this reason, we need not visit any holy *tīrtha* outside Vṛndāvana. I was amazed, though, when after traveling by van for three hours we arrived at Vṛndāvana’s Badarikāśrama and found that it was hilly and forested, a contrast to Vṛndāvana’s usual flat, arid landscape.

At Badarikāśrama we visited a temple on a large hill, at the base of which sat a small village. It took us more than forty-five minutes to climb the steep steps to the temple, and we arrived exhausted. Still, we were pleasantly surprised to find ancient Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa Deities there being cared for by an elderly *pūjārī*. A ten-year-old boy sat peacefully by his side. Wearing only a loincloth around his waist, the boy, to my amazement, was reading to the *pūjārī* from scripture.

Dīna-bandhu asked the *sādbu* where he was from. The holy man replied, “You should not ask a *sādbu* where he is from but where he is going—what is his final destination. Our birth is insignificant, but our death may be glorious. It is for this reason that I am spending my last days in Vṛndāvana.”

His words impressed me. But what impressed me more was the boy by his side. I had noticed a number of boys in the village running through the streets and causing mischief. I saw one angry shopkeeper chase them away. By contrast, this boy appeared well-behaved, clean, and respectful toward the old *pūjārī*. When the *sādbu* asked him to do something, he performed the task obediently and cheerfully, then returned to his place. It reminded me of the days of yore when boys lived in their spiritual master’s *āśrama*, studying *śāstra* and rendering service in humility. It is rare to find such examples today, even in Vṛndāvana, where television and cricket are fast becoming the focus of many young people’s attention.

I asked the *pūjārī* about him, and to my surprise learned that he lived with the old man. When I asked the boy what he did there, he replied, “I help the *bābā* worship the Lord.”

“What about your parents? Have they given you permission to live up here?”

At that he looked to the sky, indicating that his parents had left this world.

“What about school?”

Surprised, he exclaimed, “I’m serving Bābā and Kṛṣṇa!” as if to say, “What better education could I receive?”

I was to going to counter that a material education is useful, if not essential, for a devotee living in this world, but then thought better of it. Con-

sidering the boy's circumstances and his admirable qualities, I thought of this verse from the *Upaniṣads*:

*yasya deve parā bhaktir
yathā deve tathā gurau
tasyaite kathitā hy arthāḥ
prakāśante ātmanah*

“Unto those great souls who have implicit faith in both the Lord and the spiritual master, all the imports of Vedic knowledge are automatically revealed.” (*Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad* 6.23)

We held *kīrtana* for the Deities' pleasure for over an hour. Then, as we all prepared to leave, I excused myself from our group and went to find the boy. I discovered him in a little hut, preparing the Deity's offering and singing melodious prayers. Wanting to express my appreciation, I held out one hundred rupees, saying, “For you! For you!” He smiled slightly and shook his head, indicating that he wasn't interested. Still, I insisted he take the *lakṣmī*, and continued to wave it in front of him. He wasn't tempted. He simply carried on with his service. I realized that I had misjudged him; he was more advanced than I had thought. His simple life of service to the *sādbu* and the Lord was more satisfying to him than anything money could buy.

This was the second time I had received a spiritual lesson through a child. Why not? Śrīla Prabhupāda once explained that in Vṛndāvana, not even the animals are ordinary souls. Every soul in Vṛndāvana is a devotee. The animals are devotees who committed offenses in the *dhāma* in a previous life. They have taken such low births in order to free themselves from their sinful reactions before returning to Vṛndāvana in the spiritual sky. The incident with this boy left me resolved to be more careful in my dealings with the Brijbasis. I have much to learn from his dedication to his spiritual preceptor and the satisfaction he feels in living the simple, renounced life of an aspiring devotee.

“We offer our respectful obeisances to those who reject thornless king-

doms and beautiful women, who think material happiness most bitter, and who renounce education, noble birth, wealth, and fame, and who go to Vṛndāvana never to leave.

“To the supremely fortunate, pious, and affectionate persons who live in Vṛndāvana, which is more blissful than Lord Viṣṇu’s abode, and who, worshiping Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa with prayers and gifts, make Them deeply indebted to them, we offer our respectful obeisances.” (*Vṛndāvanamahimāṃṛta*, Śataka 1, texts 76–77)

4

To Share the Mercy

November 5–24

Kṛṣṇa is the focus for most Brijbasis. Whether they are priests, *sādhus*, farmers, shopkeepers, members of the town council, or tourists, Kṛṣṇa is somehow present in each of their lives. One morning as I was performing Vṛndāvana-parikrama (a two-hour walk around the entire village of Vṛndāvana), I saw pilgrims from all walks of life reverentially walking the *parikrama* path. Most were Indian, but a number were foreigners from a variety of countries. Everyone seemed focused on the same goal: to receive Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa’s mercy. If we practice Kṛṣṇa consciousness we can transcend material designations and become united on the spiritual platform, each of us questing for God. It seems a simple solution to today’s world problems: if we can only realize that we are all brothers and sisters with a common father (God), we will stop seeing some people as friends and others as enemies. Here in Vṛndāvana, every living creature is viewed with that understanding and thus offered respect, regardless of its birth.

Kṛṣṇa revealed this to me clearly when I was returning to my apartment after *parikrama*. I was walking past a telephone pole when a crow suddenly fell screaming to the ground in front of me. It had landed on a live wire and been electrocuted. Flapping, it was moving in agonized circles on the ground. Within moments, several local people ran forward to see. To my amazement, a man picked up the crow and wrapped it in his *cādar*, chanting Hare Kṛṣṇa to the bird. The crow’s eyes slowly closed and I thought it had died, but the man told his son to fetch milk and a *capāṭī*. For more than an hour he and the small group of Brijbasis carefully nudged the crow back toward life. Finally the crow opened its eyes, squawked, and flew into the air. There was a loud roar of appreciation from the small crowd as they called out, “*Jaya Rādhe! Jaya Rādhe!*”

The compassion they had shown such a lowly creature astonished me. It confirmed that in Vṛndāvana, all creatures are accepted as the Lord’s

eternal servants. Continuing on my way, I remembered a classic verse from *Bhagavad-gītā*:

*vidyā-vinaya-sampanne
brāhmaṇe gavi hastini
śuni caiva śva-pāke ca
paṇḍitāḥ sama-darśinaḥ*

“The humble sages, by virtue of true knowledge, see with equal vision a learned and gentle *brāhmaṇa*, a cow, an elephant, a dog and a dog-eater [outcaste].” (Bg. 5.18)

As I settled into my room to hear and chant, it occurred to me that Vṛndāvana is the perfect place to practice Kṛṣṇa consciousness, if only because there is so much to stimulate remembrance of the Lord. Even a simple morning walk can reveal spiritual truth. I am blessed to be here, and content with my plan to spend two more months in this transcendental abode.

But I would soon realize Prabhupāda’s statement, “I have my plan, you have your plan, but ultimately, Kṛṣṇa has His plan as well.”

Enlivened by yesterday’s early morning *parikrama*, I invited several disciples to join me this morning. As we approached one of my favorite spots, Śrīla Prabodhānanda Sarasvatī’s *samādhi mandira* near Kāliya-ghāṭa, Nandini dāsi’s cell phone rang. It is a curious thing that being situated between New Delhi and Agra, Vṛndāvana falls within cell phone range. It was the first time Nandini’s phone had rung since she had been in India, and she seemed quite surprised as she took it out of her bag and answered it. Her answering service had left her a message. I saw her pale. Not wanting to upset the tranquility of the *parikrama*, however, she didn’t say anything.

All week I have been making a special effort to take Nandini and Rādhā-sakhī-vṛndā around Vṛndāvana. This is their first trip to India, and they have earned it. Both women have worked hard helping to organize this year’s Polish tour, setting up the Festival of India as a legal foundation, and

often achieving success in the face of tremendous opposition. I appreciate their determination to preach Kṛṣṇa consciousness, and by inviting them to Vṛndāvana, I was hoping to introduce them to the essence of our spiritual tradition, thus giving them increased strength and inspiration in their preaching. This was the mood with which Śrīla Prabhupāda invited his disciples to India in the movement's early days. He wanted us to gain appreciation for our spiritual heritage and then return to the West enlivened. Nandinī and Rādhā-sakhī-vṛndā seemed to be enjoying their first week in the holy *dhāma* and were looking forward to the month ahead when they would visit Jaipur, Purī, and Māyāpur.

I couldn't put Nandinī's ringing phone out of my mind. Finally, I drew her and Rādhā-sakhī-vṛndā aside and asked who was on the phone. Nandinī was silent for a moment, then said, "Gurudeva, Rādhā-sakhī-vṛndā and I have to return to Poland tomorrow."

Stunned, I asked, "Tomorrow?! But you just got here! Why would you have to return tomorrow?"

"Do you remember the school in Swierzno we rent as our base during the summer tour?"

"Yes." I was already beginning to feel nervous.

"Our long-time friend, the school director, left a message that the local priests are pressuring him to rent the school to them for the entire summer next year. They want to use it for a recreation base for school groups from other parts of the country. In reality, the director said, their purpose is to deny our festival program a summer base. You know that school is the only one on the coast willing to cooperate with us."

I did know. I still remembered the campaign a group of senior Catholic priests had led last year along the entire Baltic seacoast, threatening and discouraging school directors from renting their institutions to our Festival of India tour. Nandinī added, "If we lose that school, where will we accommodate the two hundred festival devotees? The message was sent twelve days ago, and the director said we have until tomorrow to sign the contract. Otherwise he will be forced to sign the school over to the Church. No doubt they are thinking that by approaching the school director so many months before the holidays, they'll outmaneuver us."

“Can’t someone else in Poland sign the contract?”

“Legally, only Rādhā-sakhī-ṛṇḍā or I can sign.”

“And who knows what other tricks the priests may have up their sleeves? We have to be there,” Rādhā-sakhī-ṛṇḍā said.

Because so few people were flying, Nandinī and Rādhā-sakhī-ṛṇḍā had no trouble getting a flight to Warsaw. Late in the evening the next day they called from northern Poland: “Mission accomplished. We got there just in time to sign the contract. We have the school for the summer.”

This is the meaning of disciple. A disciple is one who will put the spiritual master’s interests before his or her own. I am grateful that Nandinī and Rādhā-sakhī-ṛṇḍā showed no hesitation in leaving India, but were willing to ensure that our preaching could continue next summer. In *Kṛṣṇa* book we read how Sāṅḍīpani Muni was similarly pleased with the surrender of his two students, Kṛṣṇa and Sudāmā, who demonstrated the proper behavior for disciples. After Kṛṣṇa and Sudāmā had undergone hardship on his behalf, Sāṅḍīpani Muni said:

My dear boys, it is very wonderful that you have suffered so much trouble for me. Everyone likes to take care of his body as the first consideration, but you are so good and faithful to your guru that without caring for bodily comforts you have taken so much trouble for me. I am also glad to see that bona fide students like you will undergo any kind of trouble for the satisfaction of the spiritual master. That is the way for a bona fide disciple to become free from his debt to the spiritual master. It is the duty of the disciple to dedicate his life to the service of the spiritual master.

What I didn’t expect was that like Nandinī and Rādhā-sakhī-ṛṇḍā, I too would have to cut my pilgrimage short. Toward the end of the telephone call, Nandinī said, “Gurudeva, we’re sending you the financial projection for next year by e-mail. With costs rising and increased government pressure that our festival meet strict security and health standards, we are going to need more money than we originally predicted.”

The next morning I opened my e-mail and read their report. I realized

I had no choice but to surrender to “Kṛṣṇa’s plan” that I leave Vṛndāvana before the end of Kārttika. I was going to have to preach and raise funds for the Festival of India.

As far as I know, there is only one reason to leave this transcendental abode: to preach Kṛṣṇa consciousness. Although *bhajana* and preaching seem so different—*bhajana* means internal meditation in a solitary place and preaching is so external and usually performed in crowded towns and villages—they are nonetheless intricately connected. By focusing on *bhajana* we become purified and thus develop a strong desire to share the nectar of Kṛṣṇa consciousness with others. By preaching under difficult circumstances throughout the year, we hanker for the special atmosphere of Śrī Vṛndāvana-dhāma, where we can relish the association of devotees and the sacred *tīrthas* without disturbance.

Śrīla Prabhupāda’s disappearance day festival was fast approaching. Knowing that helped me move from *bhajana* to preaching. I had gone to Śrīla Prabhupāda’s rooms at the Rādhā-Dāmodara temple several times to meditate on how Śrīla Prabhupāda spent so much time there, preparing for his journey to the West to introduce Kṛṣṇa consciousness to the world. Sitting alone in his rooms, I came to understand that as his spiritual son, I have the responsibility to help him carry out his mission. No doubt my stay in Vṛndāvana has been beneficial: I gained a deeper appreciation for the holy name, a clearer understanding of the scripture, and as I thought about the matter more, I realized I have also gained a stronger desire to share that mercy with others. Based on that last consideration, it seemed appropriate to leave.

On the evening before Śrīla Prabhupāda’s disappearance day, I went back to Rādhā-Dāmodara temple one last time to write my offering to Prabhupāda. In those sacred rooms where Śrīla Prabhupāda often looked out into the temple courtyard at Śrīla Rūpa Gosvāmī’s *samādhi* for inspiration, I very much felt the presence—and separation—of my spiritual master. I wrote my offering in that mood and read it to His Divine Grace the next day in the assembly of the many dear godbrothers and godsisters at

Krishna-Balaram temple. It felt like a fitting conclusion to my Vṛndāvana pilgrimage. When I was finished, I turned my attention to my duties in the West.

Here is my offering:

Dearest Śrīla Prabhupāda,

Please accept my most humble obeisances. All glories unto you on this auspicious day of your departure from this world!

In August 1976, after visiting our temple in Paris, France, you expressed your satisfaction with your visit and said you looked forward to coming back again the next year. We worked hard that coming year in the expectation of seeing your lotus feet again. In those days, with your annual visits and regular updates of your travels, we always remained absorbed in thoughts of you. Despite your busy schedule you also remembered us, often writing and encouraging us in our devotional service to the Lord. When my *saṅkīrtana* party wrote to you asking if we could install and travel with Gaura-Nitāi Deities, you responded that you felt such worship might interfere with our most important service of distributing your books. You recommended that we worship a picture of Pañca-tattva instead. You said that the members of the Pañca-tattva are the proper Deities for Kali-yuga, because they are the most benevolent and merciful of all the Lord's incarnations. Following your instructions, we worshipped a picture of their lordships with heart and soul, and as we did, our *saṅkīrtana* results increased as did our faith and attachment to you.

Although you had thousands of followers and we were separated from you by thousands of miles, we felt (as did all your disciples) your immediate concern, care, and love for us. Anxious for your return to Paris, our anticipation of seeing you again increased as each day passed.

Then in November came the unbelievable and unbearable news: you had performed your final pastime and left this world to

rejoin your beloved Lord in the spiritual sky. Śrīla Prabhupāda, on that day we were suddenly plunged into feelings of separation unlike anything we had ever experienced. In the initial stages of our devotional service, we came to know so many facets of spiritual life. One still unknown to us, however, was the pain of separation we have had to endure until this day.

Śrīla Prabhupāda, Kṛṣṇa sent Uddhava to Vṛndāvana to give His *gopīs* hope. Please send me a sign that I will indeed, by faithful and loving service, be able to join you again in your pastimes sublime. I know that *vāṇī* is more important than *vaṇub*, but if I can be assured that one day I'll be with you again, I can take any risks in my preaching. I'll know that even death itself, suffered in the line of duty, will serve my desire to bring me back to you.

In 1971 I felt separation from you after your brief visit to our Detroit temple. I expressed those feelings in a letter to you. You kindly wrote back: "Yes, I am also feeling separation from my Guru Mahārāja, but I always feel that he is watching over and protecting me." Please bless me with the same ability to see you constantly in my service to the Lord.

The responsibilities you have entrusted to all of your followers are generally reserved for the Lord's most advanced devotees. We need your guidance and protection to be able to faithfully execute your orders and to spread your teachings throughout the world.

No doubt your guidance and protection come in many ways. Often I see you in the mercy you bestow upon the devotees around me. As a single ray of light shining through a piece of crystal causes a rainbow of colors, so your mercy, reflected through the hearts of your followers, shines brilliantly in their service to you. It is by your decree that they offer their service, and just as one sees an artist's personality in his work, so we can see you in the your sincere followers' activities.

Just behold your illustrious son, Rādhānātha Mahārāja! His unique ability, inspired by you, to uplift the hearts of thousands of souls, who are spellbound by his lectures and *kīrtanas*, can best be

appreciated when he comes to Vṛndāvana for Kārttika. Buses and buses of devotees follow him throughout the *dhāma* as he introduces them to your dearest place of worship.

No doubt we see you in Gopāla Kṛṣṇa Mahārāja's service. He reflects your heart's desire that everything be done big in Kṛṣṇa consciousness. Following in your footsteps and empowered by your desire to see the movement always expand, he became the force behind the success of the Glory of India temple, which has risen from the dust of Delhi to become a place of pilgrimage.

And Lokanātha Mahārāja is truly fulfilling Mahāprabhu's desire to see the holy names chanted in every town and village. How your chest must swell with pride when you point him out to your transcendental associates in the spiritual sky. "Just see my spiritual son," you must say, "the one with the bullock cart and performing *kīrtana*. His service guarantees that he'll come to live with me eternally."

Look now, with eyes filled with love and appreciation, upon your spiritual daughter, Daivi-śakti dāsī, who continues to serve you year after year in Śrī Vṛndāvana-dhāma. She knows how dear your Krishna-Balaram temple is to you, and she faithfully carries out her duties here, much as she did when you were present. She would never leave your institution, Śrīla Prabhupāda, having faith in your words that it is the selfsame body she served personally in the days of her youth.

Now just look to the left and see your stalwart sons, Brahmānanda and Gargamuni, two of the first to receive your mercy. They know you well and continue to share you with all of us when we need you most, still speaking about you twenty-four years after your disappearance. The material energy has the ability to cause things to deteriorate with time, but the love and faith Brahmānanda and Gargamuni have for you is so strong that it resists the forces of nature and allows you to stay ever-fresh in their minds.

Do you remember Dhanañjaya and Bala Gopāla? Of course you do, for spiritual love transcends the ravages of time. They have

also chosen to remain caretakers of this *mandira*, which is so dear to you. Imbibing your desire to provide a place for your followers in the *dhāma*, they represent your concern that all of us become Brijbasis in due course of time.

And see the wandering mendicant, Dīna-bandhu Prabhu. Following your personal example, he continues to take devotees on pilgrimage in this holy land. You are an eternal resident of this sacred abode, Śrīla Prabhupāda, and we are indebted to your beloved son Dīna-bandhu for enlightening us about the glories of this most sacred *tīrtha*. He is helping us aspire to one day join you in your eternal pastimes here. Empowered by you, he speaks with the same affection you have for Śrī Vṛndāvana-dhāma.

No doubt you can see Keśava Bhārati Prabhu, who has faithfully executed one of your last desires: to take *darśana* of Govardhana Hill. By developing and overseeing his project at the foot of Giri-Govardhana, he has arranged for you to now sit peacefully in the temple room there, beckoning your followers to gradually develop a deeper understanding of the Lord.

As sons and daughters inherit their parents' qualities, so these and many, many more disciples and granddisciples demonstrate that you are with us, watching over and protecting us in our devotional service. My humble prayer on this auspicious day is that you continue to give me your association and guidance through the mercy you bestow upon these loving and loyal followers until the day comes when I can again join you in your "ISKCON in the spiritual sky."

Until then I remain,

Your servant,
Indradyumna Swami

5

Reminder in Siberia

December 1–12

Memories of my two-month pilgrimage to Vṛndāvana were still fresh in my mind as I boarded the flight from Moscow to Barnaul, deep in the Siberian countryside. As the old Russian plane lumbered down the dark runway at midnight, the dirty seats, the stench of perspiration, and the stewardesses' unfriendly attitudes all provided a stark reminder that I had indeed left the haven of Vṛndāvana's spiritual atmosphere.

In accordance with our *ācāryas'* instructions to remember Vṛndāvana while living outside the holy abode, I tried to meditate on Mānasa-gaṅgā, the beautiful lake at the foot of Govardhana where Kṛṣṇa performs His boating pastimes with His beloved *gopīs*. After a few moments, my meditation was rudely broken by the copilot, who began rummaging under my seat for the bottles of wine he had stowed there. After retrieving the bottles, he went behind a curtain where to my horror he poured glasses of wine for himself and several of the stewardesses. I turned to my disciple, Uttamaśloka dāsa, and asked if such activity was common on Russian airlines. He replied, "It's the national pastime in the air, on the ground, or at sea. We should be thankful they're not drinking vodka!"

Many passengers also began to drink, and that combined with the fact that we were flying early in the morning caused everyone to soon fall asleep. Even the stewardesses were napping in seats at the back of the plane. In this uncomfortable environment I drifted off to sleep myself, consoling myself that I must have made some spiritual advancement in Vṛndāvana: in my early days as a devotee, I would experience culture shock upon going to India; now, I experience culture shock upon leaving Vṛndāvana and returning to the West!

I was still dozing when hours later the plane began its descent into Barnaul. I awoke as a stewardess announced our destination's weather conditions. I shuddered as I thought I heard her say the temperature on the

ground was minus 14°C. I cringed at the thought of getting out of the plane and boarding the bus to get to the terminal (a typical procedure at Russian airports), but I was hardly prepared for the reality of the situation. When the plane landed and we were walking down the aisle, I asked Uttamaśloka to confirm the outside temperature with another stewardess. She responded by saying, “We didn’t announce minus 14°C, sir, we announced minus 43°C! This is Siberia, not Moscow.”

As we disembarked, a blast of wind drove the temperature even lower, and I gasped for air. Immediately I felt a sharp pain in my lungs as the freezing air entered them. Slipping and sliding on the icy tarmac, I groped my way in the darkness toward the waiting bus, the hardy Siberian passengers making their way past me without difficulty. As we walked the short distance (which seemed to take an eternity), I wondered what in the world I was doing here. Just at that moment, a young man walked up alongside me and said, “Sir, may I ask you a question?”

Trying to move my lips to form words in the freezing temperature I said, “Yes, of course.”

“I’ve been watching you and your friend. It seems you are part of a religious tradition. Is that true?”

His words shattered my illusions and quickly reminded me of why I had come to Siberia. “Yes, we’re practicing an ancient spiritual tradition that’s over five thousand years old. It’s part of India’s great religious heritage. We’ve come to Siberia to share it with the people here.”

As the passengers began to board the bus, the young man asked me to explain the difference between Kṛṣṇa consciousness and Christianity.

As time was short, I explained the similarities and differences quickly. Noticing my gloved hand in my bead bag he asked what was inside. I showed him my beads and explained the meaning of the Hare Kṛṣṇa mantra. As a smile crossed his face, I thought, “This is his first step in Kṛṣṇa consciousness.”

As we exchanged questions and answers, I became oblivious to the cold. When he asked about the nature of the spiritual world, I described the glories of Vṛndāvana and the pure love the devotees there have for Kṛṣṇa. His eyes opened wide in amazement. Suddenly he looked over and saw that all

the passengers had boarded the bus. He said, “We have to be quick now, but thank you so much for answering my questions.”

I stood there alone on the runway for a moment before moving toward the bus. Kṛṣṇa had sent that young man to remind me of my purpose in this inhospitable land. The bliss of sharing Kṛṣṇa consciousness suddenly far outweighed the austerities.

Uttamaśloka and I gathered our bags, then left the terminal. To my surprise, a *kīrtana* party of fifteen devotees greeted us! I was amazed that they could have *kīrtana* outside in such freezing conditions. One of the devotees came forward and placed a flower garland around my neck. The flowers were completely frozen, and when I bumped into another devotee, the garland shattered and fell to the ground. A car arrived and drove us straight to an apartment, where I was able to shower and change my clothes. Then we went to a large hall in the city center.

As I walked in, more than four hundred devotees were holding a rousing *kīrtana*. In my lecture, I spoke about Lord Caitanya’s mercy. Lord Caitanya gave the people of the world—regardless of race or religion—an opportunity to return to the spiritual sky in this lifetime. Inspired by the lecture, the devotees held another *kīrtana*, dancing, leaping, twirling, jumping, and laughing in great happiness. The atmosphere was very similar to the atmosphere I had just left behind in Vraja. I smiled as I thought, “No doubt I am in Siberia, but by swimming in the nectarean ocean of Lord Caitanya’s *saṅkīrtana*, I am again experiencing the blissful atmosphere of Lord Kṛṣṇa’s Vṛndāvana-dhāma!”

“I pray that my mind may always remember Lord Gaurāṅga, the *saṅnyāsī* whose eyes are like two bumblebees drawn to the glistening lotus flower of Lord Jagannātha’s face in the festive city of Nīlācala, who is tossed by great waves of ecstatic love of God, and who is the same Lord Kṛṣṇa who appeared like Cupid to the doe-eyed girls of Vraja.” (*Prabodhānanda Sarasvatī: Caitanya-candrāmṛta*, Chapter 7, text 70)

6

“They are Welcome In Our Village at Any Time”

December 11–16

On Tuesday, December 11, we awoke early to prepare for our journey to Krasnoyarsk, 1000 km further east in Siberia. I was nervous about traveling, because it was Ekādaśī. It is generally considered inauspicious to start a journey on Ekādaśī. My apprehensions were enhanced by the fact that I had just entered a Rāhu subperiod within my major Ketu period that day. The Rāhu subperiod would run for six months, and the forecast was anything but pleasant: “Favorable for spiritual endeavor, but marred by danger from sickness, air crashes, burns, moving vehicles, and opposing enemies.”

Rāhu seemed to enter stage right when our plans to take a train directly to Krasnoyarsk were changed: the train had been canceled. Uttamaśloka suggested we drive the 350 km north to Novosibirsk, then catch a train to Krasnoyarsk. I objected. “The road through the forest to Novosibirsk is unsafe, and if our vehicle were to break down, we’d be in real trouble at minus 45°C!”

But there was no alternative, and by noon we were slowly driving north on the icy road to Novosibirsk. As a strong wind began to blow, I positioned my Nṛsiṃha *śilā* in a small pouch just over my heart. I prayed for a safe journey. With the Lord personally accompanying us, I knew there was nothing to fear: “Because a *sannyāsī* has to be alone without any support or guarantee of support, he has simply to depend on the mercy of the Supreme Personality of Godhead. ‘I shall never be alone,’ one should think. ‘Even if I live in the darkest regions of a forest I shall be accompanied by Kṛṣṇa, and He will give me all protection.’ That conviction is called *abhayam*, fearlessness. This state of mind is necessary for a person in the renounced order of life.” (Bg. 16.1–3, purport)

The Lord in His most fearful form as Ugra Nṛsiṃha had only recently come to me. My dear godbrother, Caturātmā Prabhu, gave me a *śilā* that

perfectly matches the criteria of an Ugra Nṛsiṃha *śilā*. According to *śāstra* such a *śilā* must have a large, gaping mouth, large, uneven *cakras* inside the mouth, be tawny brown in color, and, most importantly, be “fearsome to behold.” Caturātmā had been worshipping the *śilā* for years but was uncomfortable with the *pūjā* because *śāstra* says that only renunciants may worship the fearsome form of Ugra Nṛsiṃha. In that form, the Lord removes all His devotee’s material possessions in order to make him a fully surrendered soul. Such a benediction is suitable for a *sannyāsi* but not necessarily for a householder. Śrīla Rūpa Gosvāmī mentions some of the benefits of worshipping a Nṛsiṃha *śilā* in text 116 of his book, *Padyāvālī*:

“A *tulasi* leaf offered to the lotus feet of the Nṛsiṃha *śilā* destroys the sin of murder. Water that has washed the lotus feet of the Nṛsiṃha *śilā* destroys the sin of theft. Foodstuff offered to the Nṛsiṃha *śilā* destroys the sin of drinking liquor. Sincere surrender to the Nṛsiṃha *śilā* destroys the sin of adultery with the wife of the spiritual master. Association with the devotees of the Nṛsiṃha *śilā* destroys the sin of offenses to the devotees. This is the extraordinary glory of the Nṛsiṃha *śilā*.”

The drive north was risky, but I thought, “There is no use in having a *śilā* of this nature unless I am prepared to take risks for the Lord.” This Deity will be my constant companion until the day I leave this mortal frame.

Two hours into our journey, our devotee driver began to fall asleep at the wheel. I made him pull over and let me drive. I drove most of the rest of the way. We arrived safely in Novosibirsk five hours later, just in time to catch our train to Krasnoyarsk. As we settled in for the fifteen-hour journey through the Siberian countryside, I breathed easier. I prefer trains to cars while traveling in remote areas.

Soon we were traveling through a densely forested region, covered in snowdrifts. Although rich in gold, iron ore, natural gas, and oil, to this day Siberia remains mostly undeveloped due to its remote location and harsh climate. The northern area in particular is inaccessible to humans, with its treeless marshy plains that never thaw. Most of the rivers here are frozen solid six to nine months of the year. The only souls brave enough to venture beyond the cities are hunters searching for wolves, reindeer, bear, antelope, and, in the Amur River region near China, leopards and tigers.

Perhaps another reason the region is slow to develop is the stigma it bears. In the 1930s and '40s, the Soviets exiled criminals and political dissidents to this area. Siberian prison camps absorbed tens of millions of victims into a forced labor system that mainly worked the salt mines. Many perished. However, I have always found that the more extreme regions of the world are better for preaching. People are not in illusion about the temporary and miserable nature of matter and are therefore more inclined to accept Kṛṣṇa consciousness.

One hour into our journey, the lady in charge of our coach came to our compartment to check our sheets and blankets. While doing so, I noticed she was studying our luggage carefully. Sometimes these ladies inform professional thieves on the train about travelers' belongings, and the thieves then steal those possessions and reward the ladies with a few rubles. Before she left, therefore, I exchanged pleasantries with her and presented her with 100 rubles, much more than any thief would reward her. She smiled at my insight and winked at me as she departed. We were safe. Giving her money was a tactful move, a traveling preacher's "trick of the trade." I learned it from *Caitanya-caritāmṛta* in the story about Sanātana Gosvāmī.

When Sanātana Gosvāmī escaped from Nawab Hussain Shah's jail in Bengal, he traveled through the jungle, hoping to join Lord Caitanya in Vṛndāvana. He was accompanied by his servant, Īśāna. Īśāna was carrying eight gold coins without Sanātana Gosvāmī's knowledge. Sanātana and his servant spent a night in a small hotel in the hilly tract of land known as Pātaḍā in Bihar, where through his palmist their host learned that Īśāna possessed gold. He decided to kill them for their money. To hide his intention, the hotelkeeper treated them as honored guests. But Sanātana had worked for the government. He was well-versed in the art of diplomacy. He easily noted the extra respect with which the hotelkeeper treated them. Assuming their host had evil intentions, Sanātana asked Īśāna how much money he was carrying, and on being told about the gold, presented the coins to the hotelkeeper. Impressed by Sanātana Gosvāmī's gesture and intelligence, the hotelkeeper assisted him in his journey through the Hazaribagh mountains and out of Pātaḍā.

When we arrived in Krasnoyarsk, we were met at the station by

the temple president, who is my disciple, Guru-vrata dāsa, along with a number of other devotees. Due to its isolated location, Krasnoyarsk receives only one or two visiting *sannyāsīs* a year, so the devotees were happy to see us. In the evening I attended a hall program where once again I found a gathering of more than five hundred enthusiastic congregational members. Among them I spotted a group of ten gypsy men, whom I had met last year when visiting Krasnoyarsk. When they saw me they folded their hands in *praṇāma* and smiled. I turned to Guru-vrata and asked if we would be having a program for the gypsies while I was in Krasnoyarsk, something we had discussed on my previous visit. He replied, “Yes, Gurudeva, they’ve been waiting one year for you.”

The program that night was especially nice. Guru-vrata had informed me that many among the congregation were educated, working as teachers, doctors, lawyers, and businessmen. I developed my theme of the glories of the holy name carefully for them, accenting it with verses and pastimes. I spoke for over an hour. After the lecture, each member of the audience without exception came forward to offer me a flower or small donation. I was embarrassed by the generous response of so many learned people, and as I received their kind offerings, I became more and more eager to hold *kīrtana* with them as a gesture of my own gratitude. I had to wait almost an hour before everyone had come forward, but then we had our *kīrtana*—a *kīrtana* so wonderful that even the finely dressed women and men chanted and danced in ecstasy.

The next morning Guru-vrata came to my apartment and informed me that the leaders of the gypsy community had agreed that I could visit their village just outside Krasnoyarsk. Guru-vrata himself was surprised, because no “outsiders” had ever been invited to the gypsy town. Gypsies are generally fiercely independent; they keep to themselves. This is how they have managed to retain their customs and traditions in an age when most ethnic groups blend into the greater society. He told me that the ten men I had met last year have been practicing Kṛṣṇa consciousness for more than four years now, regularly chanting sixteen rounds, following the regulative principles, and visiting the temple. Last year when I asked if I could visit their village, they replied that their elders would not permit it. Still, they

had promised to work on them. Guru-vrata said the elders gave their consent at the last moment.

It was arranged that we meet at the house of one of the gypsy men who was practicing Kṛṣṇa consciousness. No women were allowed to attend, because gypsy tradition prohibits women to attend public functions involving outsiders. So a group of devotee men and I headed out of town in the temple van. An hour and a half later we entered the gypsy village, which consisted mainly of old wooden houses. We saw gypsy children playing in the snow, but when they saw our van, they ran to the safety of their homes and peered at us out the windows.

We located the house where the program was to be held and walked to the door between the tall snowdrifts. I had no idea what to expect. We knocked on the door. A gypsy devotee opened it, greeting us with a “Haribol!” As we entered, I was amazed at the home’s devotional atmosphere. The house was spotless, and there were nicely framed pictures of Kṛṣṇa and Śrīla Prabhupāda on practically every wall. There was a large bookcase in the living room that contained only Śrīla Prabhupāda’s books, and on one side of the room, an altar set up with photographs of the disciplic succession and the Pañca-tattva.

I noticed that the gypsy men were nervous. I would soon understand why. But they motioned me upstairs to a large room where we would hold our meeting. When I entered the room, I found the community’s nine elders. The atmosphere was tense. I smiled and greeted them, but got no response. Instead, they stared at me in apparent disbelief. They had never seen a devotee in robes before. A few of them even scowled as they looked me up and down. All were dressed in dark clothes. Because there was a chill in the wooden house, some were still wearing their large fur coats. I noted that several of them had scarred faces.

The gypsy devotee beckoned me to a chair, and I sat down, the gypsy devotees and temple devotees before me. When one of the gypsy devotees presented me with a flower garland, I smiled nervously at the nine elders, but again received only a cold stare.

Formalities over, I began to speak, explaining how our two communities were closely related because both had their origins in India. That

I knew the gypsies hailed from India impressed the elders, especially the biggest man among them, who appeared to be their leader. After I had spoken for some time about our cultural similarities (we are both God-conscious communities and we both love to sing and dance), the leader suddenly arose, pointed at the gypsy men who were practicing Kṛṣṇa consciousness, and challenged me, “Do our people have to give up our culture to practice your religion?!”

“No,” I replied calmly, “it’s not necessary. In the beginning, one simply has to add chanting the Hare Kṛṣṇa mantra to one’s life. No one has to give up anything. By chanting God’s holy name, one will give up his bad habits.”

“Gypsies have bad habits?” he retorted. At that moment he began to cough heavily. Praying to Kṛṣṇa that my guess was right, I said, “Yes, smoking cigarettes is a nasty habit.”

At that, everyone began to laugh. Even the leader accepted that I had defeated him on that one, and he gave me a small (very small) smile.

Then one of the elders, who was holding a badly injured hand (I learned later that he had suffered a gunshot wound), challenged, “And our children?” That’s all he said, but his meaning was clear: Are we interested in turning gypsy children into Hare Kṛṣṇa devotees?

I thought for a moment, choosing my words carefully. I knew the future of the gypsy devotees lay in what I said. I replied, “What is the harm if a child is being taught to love God? Love of God is natural and is the most important thing a child can learn. Nowadays, children are losing their natural God consciousness and developing negative traits. If we encourage your children to love God through singing His names, dancing in happiness, and eating pure food offered to Him in love, we are actually serving your community. Gypsies believe in God. God consciousness is part of your tradition.”

All eyes turned to the elder. He contemplated what I had said for a few moments while he gazed at the five or six gypsy children sitting on the floor. Suddenly, to everyone’s surprise, a boy of about ten years looked up at me and said, “God is great. How can we, who are small, understand Him?” I was stunned by his intelligent and thoughtful question, as was every-

one. Looking at the boy, I replied, “Just as you learn an important subject matter from a teacher, you also learn about God from a teacher.”

“Are you such a teacher? Can you teach us about God?”

Setting aside humility to answer the hour’s need, I replied, “Yes, by my spiritual master’s mercy, I am.”

“Then tell me what the soul is made of and what happens to it when we die. Then tell me what God is like.”

The room fell silent. I looked at the gypsy elders. They were regarding me intently.

“The soul is a spiritual person with a spiritual form. God is the Supreme Person and His form is also spiritual. As His parts and parcels, His servants, we all have a loving relationship with Him. At the present moment, we have forgotten that relationship, because we think we are these material bodies and that the goal of life is material enjoyment.”

I spoke pure Kṛṣṇa conscious philosophy for forty-five minutes. I watched in amazement as everyone, both children and adults, listened. The boy’s questions had taken the conversation to another dimension, away from the challenging and threatening to the sincere and searching. I could see the elders were impressed by him, and by Kṛṣṇa’s grace, with the philosophy I was presenting.

At the end of my talk, the gypsy leader himself began to ask deeper questions. He’d heard about karma. “What is karma and why is it bad to kill animals?” And finally, “How does one become free from sinful reactions?”

The last question was the one I had been waiting for, and I began to explain the glories of chanting Hare Kṛṣṇa—how it destroys sinful reactions, uproots material desires, and awakens love of God. Then I took the drum and said boldly, “Now we will all sing and dance.” Everyone’s eyes lit up as they broke out in smiles. I thought, “Now that we’ve broken the ice, here’s our chance.”

I began the chanting slowly, beginning with Prabhupāda’s *praṇāmantra*. I focused on His Divine Grace as I sang, praying that the chanting would enter the gypsy elders’ hearts and purify them. To my knowledge, no gypsies had yet been initiated into Kṛṣṇa consciousness. It would be a

great victory if the community elders allowed their people to practice *bhakti-yoga* freely.

When I finished my prayers to Prabhupāda, I began to chant the *mahā-mantra* with the same meditative slowness so that everyone could follow. I became so immersed in the chanting that I had my eyes closed for a long time. When I finally opened them I was surprised to see everyone, including the gypsy leader, loudly chanting Hare Kṛṣṇa with big smiles showing through their huge mustaches. Everyone was clapping and rocking back and forth. I kept the *kirtana* going, beating on the *mṛdaṅga*, for almost an hour. When I finally finished, I looked around and saw that once again the holy names had defeated all logic and reason and had melted the hearts of a few more conditioned souls.

Then the devotees brought in the *prasādam*. They had prepared a feast, so all of us (devotees and gypsies alike) took our seats on the floor. After reciting the prayer to *prasādam*, we proceeded to honor it. The gypsy leader couldn't sit comfortably on the floor because his body was so large, so he remained in his chair. Halfway through the meal he said—and everyone respectfully stopped eating as he spoke—“Sir, is it all right that I am sitting higher than you? I can't sit on the floor, but I don't want to disrespect you.”

I replied, “Please don't worry. It's perfectly all right that you are sitting higher than me. I am simply a guest in your village. You are the leader.”

When I said that, he looked down and didn't say anything else for the rest of the meal.

When I finished *prasādam* I washed my hands and stood up. When the gypsy leader saw me stand, he also stood, and we were spontaneously and simultaneously drawn to one another. As I approached him, I took off my garland and, to the astonishment of all the gypsies, placed it around his neck. There was a moment of silence, then he reached out with his big arms and embraced me. As devotees and gypsies applauded, he held me tightly and I embraced him with the same intensity. Afterwards, he stepped back and announced, “They are welcome in our village at any time.”

As I prepared to leave for another program at the temple, the gypsy children pleaded with their fathers to let them come. The men looked at

their leader, and when he smiled and nodded, the children rushed to put on their coats and boots. Within a few moments they were piling into the back of the van with one of the fathers. We happily chanted the holy names of the Lord all the way to the temple.

I realized later that I had seen Lord Caitanya’s mercy unfold. Kṛṣṇa consciousness has come to stay in that gypsy community. I pray I may always have a part to play in Mahāprabhu’s mercy mission—the *saṅkīrtana* movement of the Lord’s holy names.

“He does not consider whether a person is qualified or not. He does not see who is His own and who is an outsider. He does not consider who should receive and who should not. He does not consider whether it is the proper time. The Lord at once gives that nectar of pure devotional service, which is difficult to attain even by hearing the Lord’s message, seeing the Deity, offering obeisances, meditating, or following a host of spiritual practices. That Supreme Personality of Godhead, Lord Gaurahari, is my only shelter.” (*Caitanya-candrāmṛta*, Chapter 7, text 75)



Happiness at the Orphanage

December 23

The road leading to the old orphanage on the hill was icy, so it took us several attempts to get our van to the top. We'd get halfway, and then the wheels would begin to spin on the ice and we'd slide backwards. As we struggled, I could see little faces peering out of the orphanage windows, anxious for us to make it. Deprived by destiny of mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters, these children were hankering for Christmas cheer. When we finally succeeded in maneuvering beyond the icy patches, the faces lit up, then suddenly disappeared. It wasn't difficult to imagine where the children had gone. I envisioned them running from their rooms and down the stairs to greet us.

This wasn't the first time I'd been to this house in Chelyabinsk, which has served as an orphanage since the Communist era. I came here last year during my last visit to the Ural Mountains region in central Russia. As I got out of the van, I could see that the house hadn't been much improved. In fact, it had deteriorated. The eaves hung over the side, the paint was peeling, several windows were broken, and in general, the creaky wooden building was badly in need of repair.

But there had been some improvement. As a result of the *kirtana* we'd held last year, the stories I'd told, and the wonderful feast we'd distributed, many of the children had taken a serious interest in devotional service. It hadn't taken much to convince them of the happiness of Kṛṣṇa consciousness. Śrīla Prabhupāda once said that when a spark lands on wet grass it's extinguished, when it lands on damp grass it smolders, but when it lands on dry grass it immediately ignites. Similarly, when Kṛṣṇa consciousness is presented to sinful materialists, nothing usually happens, when it's presented to the pious, they tend to become curious, but when it's presented to those seeking real relief from life's miseries, it ignites a fire of devotion to the Lord.

A few days after my last visit, several of the orphan teenage boys had begun chanting Hare Kṛṣṇa on beads. They gradually worked their way up to sixteen rounds a day. Their newfound enthusiasm was infectious, and soon other children became interested in chanting. Because the orphans were poor and couldn't afford beads, they had ingeniously carved them from the branches of trees on the property. Before long, most of the fifty children were waking early in the morning to chant. In the evenings they were assembling to read *Bhagavad-gītā*, the older boys trying their best to explain the philosophical concepts to the younger ones. The more talented children began drawing and painting Kṛṣṇa's pastimes, and within a few weeks every room in the orphanage boasted several "windows to the spiritual world." Devotees from the area continued their weekly visits, bringing *prasādam* and holding *kīrtana* with the children. Those devotees soon became the children's heroes.

The authorities didn't seem to mind until some of the children refused to eat meat, feigning illness or lack of appetite. The authorities didn't appreciate Kṛṣṇa consciousness in the same way the children appreciated it. It's true they had agreed that devotees could visit and teach the orphans devotional practices, but when they saw how spontaneously attracted to Kṛṣṇa consciousness the children had become, and how each of them had embraced devotional service, they put a stop to the practices. They forbade the children to chant Hare Kṛṣṇa, read Prabhupāda's books, or decorate the orphanage with devotional drawings and paintings. They couldn't forbid the devotees' visits, however, because the devotees provided the children's main meal of the week. But the authorities stopped everything else—or so they thought.

In fact, Kṛṣṇa consciousness had given the children such soothing relief from their bleak existence that nothing could hold them back. They began going to sleep early so they could wake up before dawn and chant softly on their beads without waking the authorities. They also met in their rooms or on the playground and secretly shared stories about Kṛṣṇa. When three of the boys reached legal age and "graduated" from the orphanage, they went straight to the local temple and joined. Orphans who found a place in foster homes (a step up from the orphanage) continued their Kṛṣṇa conscious

practices and began interesting their new stepbrothers and stepsisters in devotional service.

A spiritual revolution was taking place in Chelyabinsk, with the orphanage at its center. Rumor had it that the head of the orphanage was about to clamp down on all devotional activity—but then she mysteriously lost her job. When I heard this news, I suspected Kṛṣṇa was taking a direct hand in the orphans’ lives, and I saw the work of the Supersoul in everyone’s heart when the new director turned out to be favorable to the devotees’ visits and concern for the children. When she heard I was coming to Chelyabinsk, she asked the devotees to invite me to the orphanage to meet the children, most of whom had no memory of my previous visit because many were new orphans who had replaced the graduates and those who had gone to foster homes.

When I entered the room where the children were assembled, the head of the orphanage introduced me as a Hare Kṛṣṇa monk from America. Most of the children had never met a foreigner, and as I stood tall before them with my shaved head, saffron robes, and *tridaṇḍa*, they stared at me in wonder. Then one of their teachers ordered them to stand and sing a song for me. As they rose I couldn’t help but feel pity for them. Their clothes were hand-me-downs, and a number of children had no socks or shoelaces. Some of the little girls had shaved heads because of lice, and when I saw the dark circles under the children’s eyes due to the rigors of orphanage life, the whole scene reminded me of old black-and-white pictures of the distressed children during World War II. The woman at the piano cued them, and as she began to play, the children mechanically sang a song about Christmas. But with no Christmas presents or families with whom to share, the children simply sang the blues.

Then the director asked a nine-year-old girl to come forward and recite a poem. Uttamaśloka translated it for me: “And life is full of happiness at the time of the holiday season, when we meet and share the joys of life with all our friends and loved ones . . .” Suddenly she stopped and her eyes welled with tears. “But it’s not actually like that,” she said, and covering her face with her hands, she ran crying back to her seat.

For a few moments no one said or did anything. Then I stood up and

said, “Okay, children, we don’t want this to be an unhappy holiday! Everyone come sit down here on the floor with me!”

The children hesitated, unused to such informality. “It’s okay,” the director encouraged, and all the children ran forward and sat close to me.

“We’ll make sure you have a nice holiday—at least today,” I said to the little girl who had tried to recite the poem. After telling the children a few of Kṛṣṇa’s pastimes, which had them wide-eyed and opened-mouthed, I grabbed a *mṛdaṅga* and added, “And now our holiday will really begin!”

I asked them if they knew the Hare Kṛṣṇa song, but only three children raised their hands—the ones who were still in the orphanage from the previous year. We were beginning anew. I recited the mantra several times so they could learn it. Then I started the *kīrtana*. At first the children seemed too shy to chant, but when they noticed last year’s veterans chanting enthusiastically, it caught on, and soon all fifty children were chanting at the top of their lungs. When one of them stood up spontaneously to dance, the rest followed, and soon we were all dancing around the room. The children were desperate to enjoy the holiday season, so they gave the *kīrtana* all they had. In so doing everyone was swept away in bliss. I had the children take turns dancing in the middle of our circle, and even the orphanage teachers were amazed at their feats of twisting, turning, and leaping. There was no containing them, and I began to wonder if I had the energy to keep up. After an hour I brought the *kīrtana* to a close, and as I sat on the floor all the children crowded around me. One boy said, “That was a real party, sir!”

Just then several devotees brought in a multilayered cake. The children’s eyes lit up and they all ran for plates. I served big pieces to everyone, and then served them again when they returned for seconds. I told a few more of Kṛṣṇa’s pastimes as the children, satisfied by *kīrtana* and *prasādam*, listened intently.

Finally as I stood up to go, the children pushed one of the older boys forward with a question: “Can we write to you?”

“Yes, of course, and I’ll write back.” There was a stampede for pencils and paper—they wanted to write their first letter immediately!

“What do we call you?” one boy asked.

“Just call me Mahārāja.”

“What does it mean?”

“Something like ‘big father,’” I said, and all the children clapped.

As we got into our van and started back down the icy road with fifty or so heartfelt letters tucked into my bag, I again saw all the faces peering from behind the windowpanes, but this time each was smiling. I laughed and wondered how soon it would be before they’d all be carving *japa* beads and putting pictures of Kṛṣṇa on the walls. It didn’t look like there’d be any impediment this time. The Hare Kṛṣṇa revolution in Chelyabinsk would continue in earnest.

kṛṣṇotkīrtana-gāna-nartana-kalā-pātbojani-bhrājitā
sad-bbaktāvali-baṁsa-cakra-madbhūpa-śreṇī-vibhārāṣṭadā
karṇānandī-kalā-dhvanir vābātu me jihvā-maru-prāṅgaṇe
śrī-caitanya dayā-nidhe tava lasal-līlā-sudhā-svarādhunī

“O my merciful Lord Caitanya, may the nectarean Ganges waters of Your transcendental activities flow on the surface of my desertlike tongue. Beautifying these waters are the lotus flowers of singing, dancing, and loud chanting of Kṛṣṇa’s holy name, which are the pleasure abodes of unalloyed devotees. These devotees are compared to swans, ducks, and bees. The river’s flowing produces a melodious sound that gladdens their ears.” (Cc. *Ādi* 2.2)

8

On the Lord's Advice

December 23–January 18, 2002

After the orphanage visit, Uttamaśloka and I flew to Moscow. It was the first time in weeks we'd been afforded the luxury of flying. Although a Russian airline like Aeroflot is my least favorite, still, I welcomed the change from the rigors of driving and train transport across the vast Siberian expanse and through the Urals. Traveling in Siberia had completely exhausted me. It wasn't simply the mode of transportation, but the living in different apartments almost every night, the irregular eating, and having practically no regular sleep. My health felt like it was at a dangerously low level. I could tell because I felt my vision blurring, my knees giving in when I climbed stairs, and I found myself forgetting even simple things. My body was warning me to slow down.

On the flight to Moscow I began seriously considering my godbrother Ātmārāma Prabhu's invitation to visit the Sydney temple. He had recently offered to pay for my flight as well as to donate toward the Polish festival tour. He repeatedly mentioned Australia's hot summer. As I settled into my seat for the flight to Moscow, I asked Uttamaśloka how my Russian disciples would feel if I took time to briefly visit Australia. I didn't hear his answer; I suddenly fell asleep. I woke up three hours later as our plane began its descent into Moscow. Uttamaśloka was shaking me. I had practically been unconscious. As I came to, he repeated what must have been his answer to my question hours ago, "Your disciples will be disappointed if you shorten your Russian tour, but they will certainly understand."

When we arrived at a disciple's apartment in Moscow, I called Ātmārāma and accepted his invitation. As I had to wait two days for the flight to Australia, I decided to go to Riga, Latvia, to spend time with the devotees there. Latvia was in the midst of the severest winter in memory, and when I arrived at the airport, the devotees apologized for the austere conditions. I asked how cold it was, and they replied, "Minus 5°C."

To their amazement I replied, “Oh, that’s warm.” I still remembered the chilling minus 47°C I had endured for weeks in Siberia. In fact, when we left the airport and walked outside, I took off my jacket and wore only my heavy sweater on the way to the car.

After many years of litigation, the Latvian devotees have finally gained ownership of their temple building, which is situated on one of Riga’s main streets. The five-story building is over one hundred years old, but still in good shape. Its prominent downtown location adds to its value and to the stature of the temple restaurant inside the building. The Sunday feast is well attended. The devotees have managed to maintain a Food-for-Life program in Riga for nine years. Hundreds of plates of *prasādam* are served daily from a temple kitchen at street level.

Because I would be in Riga for only two days, the devotees kept me busy giving classes, holding *kirtanas*, and meeting individually with my disciples. I struggled through every minute, as my health continued to deteriorate. I began to seriously consider taking a break for a month or two—certainly before the Polish festival tour. I will be fifty-three in May, and Cāṅakya Paṇḍita’s aphorism about aging is becoming more apparent to me: “A horse becomes old by remaining tied up, a woman ages by lack of attention from her husband, a garment becomes old by being left in the sun, and a man becomes old by constant travel.” (*Niti-śāstra*, Chapter 4, text 7)

But I had miles to go before I could experience peace, solitude, or rest. On December 26, I boarded a flight for Moscow, where I caught a fifteen-hour flight to Tokyo. I had requested the travel agent to arrange a day’s stopover in Tokyo before continuing south to Sydney. I wanted to break my journey to ease the travel, but also because I was curious to see Japan. It is one of the few countries I haven’t visited in my years as a traveling preacher.

Visiting the many parts of God’s creation is one of the ways in which a *sannyāsī* gains detachment from the world and inspiration to go back to the spiritual sky. Wherever a *sannyāsī* goes in the temporary material world, he sees nothing to compare with the beauty of the spiritual world he has discovered in the Vedic scriptures. Prabhupāda writes, “It is the duty of a mendicant to experience all varieties of God’s creation by traveling

alone through all forests, hills, towns, villages, etc., to gain faith in God and strength of mind as well as to enlighten the inhabitants with the message of God.” (*Bhāg.* 1.6.13, purport)

I had assumed Tokyo would be warm. I wasn’t prepared for the chilly winter weather. I had not brought warm clothes with me, and during my thirty-six-hour layover (during which the Japanese devotees kindly showed me their temple, restaurant, and some of the country’s sites), I came down with bronchitis. Of course, the illness was the cumulative effect of months of intense service under austere conditions, and by the time I reached Sydney two days later, even the summer warmth couldn’t check the illness. Nevertheless, although the bronchitis got worse, I gave my best to preaching during my ten-day visit to Australia and New Zealand and tried not to let on how sick I was. After several days in Sydney, I traveled north to the Gold Coast, Australia’s summer resort area, and participated in a wonderful evening *Ratha-yātrā* festival in Byron Bay in New South Wales. Over 45,000 people witnessed the chariot festival that had many dancing in *kīrtana* with us until the stroke of midnight, when we all welcomed in the new year with Kṛṣṇa’s holy names.

The next day, as I lay ill in bed at the New Govardhana farm, I decided that Mother Nature was giving me a clear signal: it was time to rest. I decided not to return to the Russian winter and instead booked a ticket to Durban, South Africa. The devotees there keep a room for me in the temple—a habit left over from 1987 when I was the temple president. I knew it would be midsummer there, and I thought I could recuperate completely before the scheduled preaching tour to America with Śrī Prahlāda in March and April.

To confirm my decision, a young boy walked up to me on my way to the temple and said, “You don’t look well, Mahārāja. My daddy says you’re traveling too much. He says it’s not good. He says more rest and a good swim would fix you up.”

“Okay,” I replied, and I remembered the swimming pool near the Durban temple.

On January 7 I flew from Sydney to Johannesburg. It was a long flight,

during which I sat next to a businessman from New Zealand. An hour into the flight, he asked me who I was and what I was doing. He had heard something about the Kṛṣṇa consciousness movement and wanted to know more. I told him I was a traveling monk on my way to South Africa for rest and recuperation. I mentioned a few of the ordeals of traveling I had experienced over the past few months. He wasn't impressed. He actually told me I shouldn't complain. He showed me a book he was reading about the eighteenth-century British navigator, Captain James Cook, called *Farther Than Any Man*. Traveling in Captain Cook's day was much more difficult and austere than I could imagine. He handed me the book and suggested I read the first chapter.

Captain Cook was both a professional sailor and an adventurer, but his life at sea was no pleasure cruise. The wooden sailing ships in those days could hardly be called comfortable or safe. The upper decks were full of huge masts and ropes, leaving little space to walk. Below, the crew slept in dingy, rat-infested, foul-smelling holds. Sailors slept in hammocks two meters long and strung just 350 centimeters apart. At sea they faced storms, lightning, freezing temperatures, fire, and the danger of amputations from snapped ropes or sudden death from crashing masts. The ships' toilets—"seats of ease" as they were known—were made of planks extended over either side of the bow. A hole was cut into the planks and the edges sanded. A man did his business precariously, dangling over an open ocean. When the weather was calm (which was rare), there was no problem, but when the sea was violent, answering nature's call became difficult, if not extremely dangerous. A popular saying of the time was, "Those who go to sea for pleasure would go to hell for pastime." If one chose to travel from Australia to South Africa (as I was doing), his company would be much more unpleasant than my friend the businessman, who had comfortably fallen asleep as I read the first chapter of his book. Sailors in those days were poor, foul-mouthed, and prone to disease. They knew that most of them would die at sea, so they drank as if there were no tomorrow. Earnings were often squandered gambling or on drink, and fights were common because of the heavy drinking and close living quarters. Fights tended to be bloody and fatal, as sailors were in the habit of arming themselves at

all times with a sharp knife.

Most sailors in the Royal Navy in those days were the dregs of society, physically abducted by press gangs and thrown onboard ships against their will. Most didn't know how to swim and were prone to seasickness. The long duration of voyages meant ships were deliberately over-manned at the start to compensate for the many deaths. Hundreds of men died of typhus or scurvy on every voyage.

When I reached the end of the first chapter, I'd had enough. I put the book aside and counted my blessings to be traveling in the twenty-first century. I wasn't ready to give up my idea of a short break for a month, but I doubt I'll ever complain again about the trans-Siberian railroad. I didn't have to deal with typhus, scurvy, or drunken sailors wielding knives!

I landed in South Africa on January 8. After resting for a few days, I did a little preaching to keep in form, including an interview with a local newspaper. The subject was genetic engineering through cloning. Scientists wanted to raise cloned pigs so that their organs could be used for human transplants. I told the reporter that such procedures were demonic and that the severe karmic reactions for such animal experiments far outweighed any so-called medical benefits. I quoted Prahāda Mahārāja in *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* explaining how the solution a materialist proposes for a particular problem is often worse than the problem itself:

*yasmāt priyāpriya-viyoga-saṁyoga-jaṅma-
śokāgninā sakala-yoniṣu dabyamānaḥ
duḥkhaṣadhaṁ tad api duḥkham atad-dhīyāhaṁ
bhūman bbramāmi vada me tava dāśya-yogam*

“O great one, O Supreme Lord, because of combination with pleasing and displeasing circumstances and because of separation from them, one is placed in a most regrettable position, within heavenly or hellish planets, as if burning in a fire of lamentation. Although there are many remedies by which to get out of miserable life, any such remedies in the material world are more miserable than the miseries themselves. Therefore I think that the only remedy is to engage in Your service. Kindly instruct me in such service.” (*Bhāg.* 7.9.17)

The next day my name and picture appeared on the second page of the newspaper with an article condemning cloning.

After a week in Durban, I decided to begin a light exercise program to build up my strength. Remembering the young boy's words, I decided to visit the nearby swimming pool. The next morning, as I dove into the clear water and raced back and forth in the lanes, I remembered my days as a swimmer in high school. Memories of racing competitions surfaced. My father and mother would often sit in the bleachers, cheering me on. Then I thought, "Of what use are such memories, now faded with time? Where are all the family members who used to encourage me? Most are dead and gone. Now I'm alone in a pool, exercising simply to stay alive."

*naikatra priya-saṁvāsah
subhṛdām citra-karmaṇām
oghena vyūhyamānānām
plavānām srotaso yathā*

"Many planks and sticks, unable to stay together, are carried away by the force of a river's waves. Similarly, although we are intimately related with friends and family members, we are unable to stay together because of our varied past deeds and the waves of time." (*Bhāg.* 10.5.25)

Pushing aside thoughts of times gone by, I began reciting the Sanskrit *ślokas* I had been learning over the past few weeks. With each stroke in the water, I repeated a line from a verse and tried to remember the meaning. After swimming a kilometer, (I surprised myself that I had that much endurance), I sat catching my breath on the side of the pool. An elderly Indian man, who had just finished his own exercise in the pool, came alongside me and said, "Aren't you the swami whose interview about cloning pigs appeared in the newspaper yesterday?"

"Yes, sir, that was me."

"I appreciated your comments. Cloning is tampering with the laws of nature given by God. No good can come from it. But Swami, I have another question for you."

"Yes, of course," I said, adjusting my goggles for my next set of laps.

“You’re a *sannyāsī*. What business do you have in a pool like this? *Sannyāsīs* should be studying scripture or traveling to enlighten others.”

“It’s a long story,” I said as I jumped back into the pool. “Come to the temple for the program tonight and we can discuss it.”

I smiled to myself as I raced to the other end of the pool. It seemed I was subject to criticism whether I traveled or rested. That reminded me of a story Śrīla Prabhupāda told of a man and his son’s journey on a horse. Once a man and his son were traveling to visit relatives in a nearby village. The man was riding the horse and the son was walking alongside. As they passed through one village, a man said, “Just see, that man is riding the horse and his son has to walk.” Hearing this criticism, the man got off the horse and let his son ride. When they passed through the next village, a man said, “Just look, the boy is riding the horse and his father has to walk.” So the man jumped on the horse along with his son and they rode together toward the next village. As they entered the town, they heard a man exclaim, “Just consider how cruel that man and his son are. They are both riding the poor horse!” Finally, the man and the boy got off the horse and walked alongside it into their relatives’ village. As soon as they arrived at their destination, however, their relatives greeted them with, “How foolish you both are not to ride the horse.”

That night the Indian gentleman came to the temple and asked for me. I was surprised when he came into my room. I asked him to sit down, and after a half hour of discussion, he again raised his question about a *sannyāsī*’s traveling and recreation. Suddenly an idea came to me. I reached into my drawer and pulled out my passport. I handed it to him. The eighty-eight pages (I have had supplementary pages added three times) were full of immigration stamps from all over the world. His eyes lit up.

“You do travel a lot,” he exclaimed.

“Yes,” I replied, “and now on the Lord’s advice, I’m taking a short break.”

“On the advice of the Lord?” he asked, puzzled.

“Yes, on the advice of the Lord even a *yogī* is allowed recreation from time to time.” Picking up the *Bhagavad-gītā* I read to him from the sixth chapter: “He who is regulated in his habits of eating, sleeping, recreation

and work can mitigate all material pains by practicing the yoga system.”
(Bg. 6.17)

As he stood up, he smiled and said, “We’ll meet at the pool tomorrow,
Swami. Thank you very much.”

9

Kīrtana Bliss In the Land of Zulus

January 19–February 11

Since my arrival in South Africa, my Indian disciple, Lakṣmīnātha dāsa, has been inviting me to participate in one of his daily Food-for-Life programs. He has been almost single-handedly cooking and distributing over 50,000 plates of *prasādam* a week to the rural areas north of Durban for over five years now. Known as Kwazulu Natal, the region is inhabited by Zulus, the largest of the African tribes in South Africa, many of whom live in abject poverty. Knowing that crime is rampant in the area, and that the presence of white people in the South African townships is not appreciated by those who have suffered under apartheid, I have been hesitant to agree.

It is dangerous even for nonwhites. Last month, Lakṣmīnātha’s Food-for-Life van was hijacked at gunpoint in broad daylight. He had stopped to give *prasādam* to a few young children on the roadside when three men pulled up in a car, jumped out, and aimed an AK-47 at him. They demanded the keys to his van. Lakṣmīnātha got out of the van slowly and stepped aside. The men jumped into the van and sped off—with a quarter ton of *prasādam* inside. When the police found the van five hours later in a nearby township, it had been stripped of everything—the engine, doors, windows, tires, and the *prasādam*.

Since then, another group of men tried to hijack Lakṣmīnātha’s new van. He was driving through a township when a gang blocked the road. Several men came forward and demanded the keys. Not seeing any weapons this time, Lakṣmīnātha refused, saying, “I’m feeding your people. Why do you want to stop me?”

One of the men replied, “Where do you get the money to feed us?”
“From God.”

The man shot back, “Why doesn’t God take care of me!”

Lakṣmīnātha screamed, “If you call out to Him, maybe He will. Why don’t you chant Hare Kṛṣṇa!”

Startled, the man stepped back and said to his friends, “Let him go.”

Lakṣmīnātha drove off, but he stopped a few hundred meters away. Taking the big pots from the back of the van, he called out in a loud voice, “Hare Kṛṣṇa! Come and get *prasādam*!” Soon several hundred people had gathered with bowls in their hands to receive the Lord’s mercy.

His boldness and determination have made Hare Kṛṣṇa a household word among the Zulus. Wherever you drive in the greater Durban area, you can see small Zulu children begging at stoplights. Whenever a devotee drives up, they jump up and down excitedly, calling out, “Hare Kṛṣṇa! Hare Kṛṣṇa!” Instead of asking for money, they ask for *prasādam*. Their enthusiasm is evidence of Lakṣmīnātha’s service.

Śrīla Prabhupāda once pointed out how a child’s enthusiasm could be proof of our preaching success. He was walking along the beach in Mumbai with some of his disciples when a little girl walked by and with folded hands said, “Hare Kṛṣṇa!” Prabhupāda turned to his disciples and said, “You see how successful our movement is?”

Confused, one devotee asked, “Successful? Śrīla Prabhupāda, only one little girl has said Hare Kṛṣṇa.”

Śrīla Prabhupāda replied, “Yes, if you take just one drop of the ocean and taste it, you can understand what the whole ocean tastes like. Similarly, by this one girl greeting us with Hare Kṛṣṇa, we can appreciate how far the chanting of the Lord’s name has spread.”

A few days ago, wanting to reciprocate with Lakṣmīnātha’s service, I agreed to accompany him to a Zulu township. The next morning I was napping after the temple program when a police officer knocked on my door. Half asleep, I called out, “Who’s there?”

“Sergeant Singh, Durban Police,” came the official reply.

Still jittery about the day ahead, I jumped up and answered the door, saying, “Oh, Sergeant Singh, thank you for coming. Would you like to come in for a moment?”

“No, Swami,” he replied. “Lakṣmīnātha and the boys are waiting for us

at the Food-for-Life kitchen. Let's go."

Grabbing my *japa-mālā*, a shoulder bag, and my *danḍa*, I followed Sergeant Singh to his police car, where he opened the trunk and put my bag inside. Before closing it, he pulled out his service belt holstering a Tanfoglio 9 mm revolver. Taking the gun out of the holster, he checked the chamber to see if it was loaded. He said, "It holds fifteen rounds. But don't worry, I doubt I'll have to use it. The Zulus in the townships love Lakṣmīnātha. He's got *carte blanche* to go into the African areas where no Indian or white man would dare to go. But resentment against the former apartheid regime runs deep in the townships, and we can't take any chances. Since he was hijacked a couple of weeks ago, we go with him any time he calls. There are always oddballs out there—and those who are desperate. They're mighty poor folk."

With the lights flashing on top of his police car, the sergeant and I pulled out of the temple complex with Lakṣmīnātha and a few other Indian boys in the van following. Another car with four women devotees followed them. Sergeant Singh smiled and said, "A police car with flashing lights gives an air of importance to a mission, don't you think?"

"Yes, officer," I replied, "you're welcome anytime."

We drove north out of Durban for an hour, passing sugarcane fields, to Kwa Mashu, the native land of the Zulus. An hour later, we pulled up along a ridge overlooking a beautiful valley. Sergeant Singh said, "A few hundred kilometers north of here, the Boers defeated the Zulus in the Battle of Blood River. That was December 1838. The river was previously called the Ncome River, but so many Zulu warriors were repulsed into the river and killed in that battle that the water turned red. This huge valley once provided the Zulus who lived here all they required for their livelihood. Now many of them have left to live in cities like Durban and Johannesburg. The land lies barren. Those who still live here live in shacks."

As I surveyed the sloping ridge going into the valley, I saw small dwellings that had been assembled from all sorts of material—pieces of corrugated metal, planks of wood, and sheets of plastic—bound together in various shapes and forms. I couldn't imagine life inside such shacks.

Sergeant Singh continued, "To many nineteenth-century Europeans,

the Zulu epitomized the romantic notion of the ‘noble savage.’ While they may indeed have been noble, they were far from savage. Their warfare was characterized by iron-willed discipline and their society by a sophisticated culture influenced by the environment in which they lived. Even though most Zulus have become westernized, many of them adhere to their traditional customs, rituals, and ceremonies. Just look over there, coming up the path. That’s an *isangoma*, a traditional healer.”

I looked at the path and saw a stocky woman with a headdress made of hundreds of colored beads.

“She’s the village doctor,” Sergeant Singh explained. “Look closely and you’ll see a dried goat bladder plaited into the beadwork of her headdress. She’s also carrying the traditional wildebeest tail fly whisk. They say *isangomas* can communicate with the village ancestors. They’re masters of a form of natural medicine using a vast range of herbs, barks, and roots.”

As she walked by our car I smiled at her, but she didn’t seem to notice me.

“They’re often in a kind of trance,” said Sergeant Singh. “Unfortunately, the original Zulu culture still exists only here in the rural areas. In the cities, the Zulus are prone to drinking, fighting, and stealing. In Durban the crime rate among Zulus is escalating out of control, and over half of them have been found to be HIV positive.”

“Good candidates for Lord Caitanya’s mercy,” I said.

Lakṣmīnātha’s van, which was parked behind us, then drew up alongside. Lakṣmīnātha, a smile of anticipation on his face, said, “Let’s do *hari-nāma* from this spot down into the valley. I’ll drive the van in front of the *kīrtana* party and Sergeant Singh can follow behind. We’ll distribute *prasādam* at the bottom.”

I picked up the *mṛdaṅga*, adjusted the strap, and began to warm up with a few beats. I asked Lakṣmīnātha, “When we get there, how will the people know we’re distributing *prasādam*?”

“This is not the first time we’ve been here. The sound of your drum will announce everything. Just look what a few beats have done!”

Turning my head, I was startled to see hundreds of Zulu children, most of them poorly clothed, running toward us on the dirt road leading into

the valley. They were carrying a variety of bowls, cups, pots, dishes, and even garbage bins. They were running and calling out, “Hare Kṛṣṇa! Hare Kṛṣṇa! Hare Kṛṣṇa!”

I continued to play the drum, and then began to sing Hare Kṛṣṇa. The three boys that had come in Lakṣmīnātha’s van joined in with *karatālas*. Within minutes, we were surrounded by dancing children. Sergeant Singh said, “They love the drumbeats. It’s in their blood. Wait till you hear them sing. Zulus have beautiful voices.”

Hearing that, I requested the children through the small sound system to repeat the *mahā-mantra* after me as I sang. As they all responded in unison, I was struck with wonder. They really did have beautiful voices! Harmonizing naturally, they sounded like an experienced choral group. I thought to myself, “This is a *kīrtana* man’s paradise!”

Following Lakṣmīnātha’s lead, we moved down the road into the valley. As he went to his car, Sergeant Singh whispered in my ear, “It’s all very fun, but remember that you’re an uninvited guest in a hostile environment and you’re white. Don’t go off the beaten track and always keep your eyes on me.”

The Zulus in the shacks along the road began to line the road. Most smiled and waved, but I noticed some stern glares among the older youth. I kept looking back at Sergeant Singh, and as I did he would flash the blue lights of his police car.

I kept the *kīrtana* going strong, playing the drum as hard as I could and chanting loudly. The sound reverberated off the nearby hills, announcing our descent into the valley. Although there may have been some risk going into that shanty town, I was in bliss. The children were responding to the *kīrtana* like nothing I’d seen. It may have been in their blood, as Sergeant Singh said, but for the time it took us to walk to the bottom of the valley, they were in Lord Caitanya’s *saṅkīrtana* party becoming purified—dancing and chanting Hare Kṛṣṇa with delight.

The further along we went, the more children joined us, pouring spontaneously out of the shacks with an ever-expanding assortment of bowls and dishes. Some were so poor that they had only cardboard boxes from which to eat, but every one of them was swept up in the nectar of *saṅkīrtana*.

The happy mood contrasted with the dirt and filth of the township. Garbage lay everywhere, and an open sewer often crossed the dirt path we were following.

It was also both hot and humid. As the sun beat down on us, I lamented that I hadn't brought a hat to keep off the sun. Within an hour I was completely exhausted, but it was so much nectar chanting with that huge crowd of children, I couldn't stop.

Two hours later we reached the bottom of the valley, where hundreds of people were waiting to take *prasādam*. I kept the *kīrtana* going though, as the children couldn't seem to get enough. They continued dancing madly. A few of them even rolled on the ground!

Finally, I brought the *kīrtana* to a close. The children swarmed around me. They spoke excitedly in Zulu, which I couldn't understand. Sergeant Singh smiled and said, "They say they want more *kīrtana*."

Because I didn't immediately comply, the children began to chant, "Zulu! Zulu!

Zulu!" I thought, "Oh, I'd better bring them back to the transcendental platform!" I told Lakṣmīnātha to open the van and distribute the *prasādam*. As he did so, the children stampeded toward the van. Several of the Zulu men stepped forward and commanded the children to form lines and wait their turn. After a few tense moments, things were under control and I jumped inside the van to help distribute the *prasādam*.

Lakṣmīnātha had made a *kitchari* rich with butter and vegetables. The children began to ask for ever-larger portions, and we served them all. An hour later, a large group of children motioned to me to sit among them on the grass. I climbed out of the van and went over to the children with Sergeant Singh. There were well over one hundred children sitting tightly in a circle. As I sat down, they pressed forward to be near me. When I noticed that most of them suffered from one skin disease or another—ringworm, impetigo, scabies—I moved back a little.

All eyes were upon me. At first they were silent, then one girl in the back said something. The young boy closest to me reached out and ran his index finger down my arm. Holding up his finger he shook his head and laughed. At that, the other children laughed too. Sergeant Singh was also

laughing. I asked him what was so funny.

“The little ones have never been this close to a white man before. They thought you painted yourself white,” he said. “It’s a custom among Zulus to sometimes cover themselves with a whitish cream. It’s seen as a sign of beauty.”

Then the boy proudly held up his black arm and pointing to it, chanting, “Zulu! Zulu! Zulu!” Again the other children joined in.

I interrupted their chanting and asked them to be silent for a moment. With Sergeant Singh translating, I told them that we are not our bodies. Our real identities are as the soul inside. The soul is an eternal servant of God. They stared at me with blank faces, and I realized I wasn’t going to get far presenting even the ABCs of *Bhagavad-gītā* to these young Zulu children. Still, their enthusiasm for *kirtana* and *prasādam* had already proven them worthy of Lord Caitanya’s mercy. I picked up the drum, and even before I started playing it, they were moving their bodies to an expected beat. When several of them called out “Hare Kṛṣṇa,” the rest quickly followed. Soon we were back in the spiritual world, chanting and dancing without cessation, hundreds of small black bodies jumping and twirling in bliss.

Many of the children’s parents standing on the outside of the circle were also moving to the *mṛdaṅga* beat and chanting the holy names. Lord Caitanya’s *sankīrtana* movement is indeed the perfect formula for developing love of God in any part of the world. Nearby, just 150 years ago, the Europeans and Zulus were fighting fierce battles for the land. Now, by Lord Caitanya’s mercy, white men and Zulus were dancing happily together, their combined voices echoing the holy names of God throughout the valley.

After a while, Sergeant Singh caught my eye and indicated that the sun was setting. Although we were having fun, it was too dangerous to remain in the township after dark. I reluctantly finished the *kirtana* and got into the police car. A multitude of sad faces looked on as we ascended the hill. “I can’t remember the last time I enjoyed a *kirtana* so much,” I told the sergeant. “I’ll never forget these kids.”

“They’ll probably never forget you either,” he said. “You’ll always be welcome back, and you won’t need me next time. There’s plenty more work

to be done here, Swami. There are ten million Zulus in Kwazulu Natal, and they all have sweet voices!”

“One who is untouched by any piety, who is completely absorbed in irreligion, or who has never received the merciful glance of the devotees or been to any holy place sanctified by them will still ecstatically dance, loudly sing, and even roll about on the ground when he becomes intoxicated by tasting the nectar of the transcendental mellows of pure love of God given by Lord Caitanya. Let me therefore glorify that Lord Caitanya Mahārabhu.” (*Caitanya-candrāmṛta*, Chapter 1, text 2)

10

A Brush with the Demonic

February 12–March 7

After nearly two months of rest and recuperation in Durban, I realized it was time to continue my preaching. I had already arranged a two-month tour of America, so I made a reservation on a flight from Johannesburg to Atlanta, Georgia for March 2.

Of the many things with which I need to concern myself before leaving the country, I was most interested in picking up a small piece of jewelry I had asked to have made for my Deities. On February 28, I tried to telephone Cookie, the sister of my aspiring disciple, Suren Vallabjee. The Vallabjee family has owned a jewelry store in the Durban suburb of Tongat for years, and Cookie was instrumental in ensuring that the piece I ordered would be ready on time. After repeatedly getting a busy signal, I decided to drive to the shop to see how the work was progressing. As I got into the car I asked the driver to head north to Tongat, calculating that we would arrive at the shop around 11:00 A.M.

But as we were driving out of the driveway, I received a call from Classic Eyes, an optometrist with whom I had placed an order for a new pair of glasses. I was surprised to learn that the glasses, including a prescription lens imported from London, were ready. “That’s odd,” I thought, “those glasses aren’t supposed to be ready until the day after tomorrow.”

I decided to pick up the glasses first. I told the driver to change direction and make for the optometrists in the south of Durban instead.

“But Mahārāja, it makes more sense to go to Tongat first. If we do that, we’ll miss the traffic.”

I hesitated, then said, “Let’s pick up the glasses first. That way, if there’s something wrong with them there is still time to have them corrected.”

We arrived at Classic Eyes at 11:00 A.M. and spent the next fifteen minutes determining that the glasses were suitable and paying the bill. As we

left the shop, ready to drive back through Durban to Tongat, my cell phone rang again. The news I received sent a chill up my spine: “Mahārāja, this is Sukumāri dāsi. A terrible thing has happened. There was an armed robbery at the Vallabjee’s jewelry shop fifteen minutes ago. Ten African men armed with AK-47s burst in and made everyone lie on the floor. When Suren’s twenty-eight-year-old nephew, Vishal, stumbled into the scene, one of the gunmen shot him dead. They stole all the cash in the safe and many items of jewelry. The family is in shock.”

“Phone them and tell them I’ll be there in an hour.” It was only as we were racing to Tongat that I realized that I had originally planned to be in the shop at 11:00 A.M., just as the holdup was taking place.

Vishal’s funeral was held on the morning I was to fly to America. He was a pious man, and he left behind his wife and two children. More than five thousand people attended, and I was asked to speak. I emphasized the temporary nature of material life and how we must all be prepared to die. Death often comes unexpectedly and it is never welcome. We must prepare ourselves by always remaining Kṛṣṇa conscious. I spoke from the heart because I felt close to the family. I also spoke with a sense of urgency, realizing that had it not been for Kṛṣṇa’s mercy, it could easily have been me who had been shot. I experienced a deepening conviction to take full advantage of all my opportunities to become Kṛṣṇa conscious before my own departure.

“Friend, when you will die? Do you know? Do not even infants sometimes die unexpectedly? With clear intelligence, without attachment to the body and senses, and without stopping to think, run to Vṛndavana.” (*Vṛndāvana-mahimāmṛta*, Śataka 1, text 78)

Two hours later I was on my way to Johannesburg airport. When I had checked in for my flight and cleared Immigration and Customs, I found myself relaxing in the departure lounge. It was a large area, with hundreds of passengers waiting for flights. Suddenly, I felt a sharp pain on my right cheek. It stunned me. When I looked around I saw a trio of rough young men about twenty meters away. They were all laughing. The next moment, one of them put what looked like a small metallic ball into his mouth, placed a metal straw to his lips, and blew the object toward me. It came fast, and before I could move it hit me in the temple. I stood up immediately.

The young men motioned for me to come forward. Instead, I stepped back, picked up my bags, and moved to another part of the lounge. They followed me, unnoticed by the other passengers, and the young man blew another projectile at me. This time it missed. Not wanting to be detected, the young men pretended nothing had happened. No one else in the lounge was aware of what was going on. I was unsure of what to do. I wished I had another devotee with me. I have been traveling alone since Śrī Prahlāda and his wife moved to Māyāpur last September. This isn't the first time I had found myself in an awkward situation.

Suddenly two policemen appeared nearby, so I picked up my bags and walked toward them. As I approached, I looked over my shoulder for the young men, but they had disappeared. When the policemen asked me what I wanted, I told them that a group of young men had been harassing me. The officers said they would keep a lookout for them. As we were talking, my flight was called and I excused myself to board the plane.

As a result of the incident I was one of the last to board, and when I entered the cabin I saw that the section was full except for my seat. As I headed for my place and put my bags in the overhead compartment, I noticed all eyes upon me. At first I thought it must have been my cloth (which I had dyed a bright saffron the day before), but it was unusual that every single person in that section of the plane was studying me.

When I sat down, I looked around and noticed that everyone in my section was in their sixties or seventies. I sensed they were part of an organization. After we took off and people began to speak freely, I realized that they were all Americans. I thought, "Oh no, there's going to be a real party spirit as we cross the Atlantic. I probably won't get a moment's rest!" It is difficult enough on long international flights to associate with materialistic people. They tend to drink alcohol, eat meat, and watch movies, absorbing their minds in sinful activities. It had already been a tough day. I wasn't looking forward to being in the middle of a group of Americans celebrating the last day of their vacation. I longed for the association of devotees, with whom I could read and chant peacefully.

Soon the hostesses came around with drinks. I was surprised that no one in my section ordered anything alcoholic. One after another they or-

dered fruit juice. Never have I seen that! I also ordered a fruit juice, and as I did, the gentleman next to me smiled.

When the hostesses served the meal half an hour later, all the passengers in my section took a tray but did not begin eating. When everyone had their food in front of them, one of the men stood and said, “We will all say grace together.” With that, everyone offered a prayer thanking God for the food. Then they began to eat.

By now I realized I was in the midst of a group of devout Christians, and taking advantage of the beneficial association, I unpacked my *prasādam*, said a quick prayer, and began to eat along with everyone else. They may not have had shaved heads, but I was certainly happy to be in their company.

After we had eaten the cabin crew turned on the movie. Everyone in my section took out their Bibles and began reading privately. Taking my cue, I took out my pocket *Bhagavad-gītā* and, smiling, also began to read. My desire to hear and chant among devotees was coming true!

Eventually, I turned to the man next to me and asked what Christian denomination he was affiliated with. I didn’t catch the name of the group, but he said there were fifty members of his “faith” returning from missionary work in Africa. When I said I was thankful for their association, he smiled and asked if I was a Buddhist. I told him I was a Hare Kṛṣṇa devotee and that I was also engaged in global missionary work. We spoke briefly about the need for God consciousness in the world, then drifted off to sleep.

Śāstra states that there are two kinds of men, the divine and the demonic:

*dvau bhūta-sargau loke ’smin
daiva āsura eva ca
viṣṇu-bhaktāḥ smṛto daiva
asuras tad-viparyayaḥ*

“There are two classes of men in this created world. One consists of the demonic and the other the godly. The devotees of Lord Viṣṇu are the god-

ly whereas those who are just the opposite are called demons.” (*Padma Purāṇa*)

After a brush with the demoniac and hankering for the association of the pious, I was thankful that Kṛṣṇa had placed me in a pious situation for the twenty-hour flight to Atlanta. It seemed an auspicious beginning to my tour of America. I pray it will give rise to more good association and opportunities to preach the Lord’s glories.

11

A Letter to Tamal Krishna Goswami

March 16

Dear Tamal Krishna Goswami,
Please accept my most humble obeisances. All glories to Śrīla Prabhupāda.

Today I am writing you a posthumous letter, just as our spiritual master, Śrīla Prabhupāda, did in the assembly of his disciples in Seattle when his godbrother Bhakti-prajñāna Keśava Mahārāja passed away in 1968. Śrīla Prabhupāda wrote: “Be it resolved that we the undersigned members and devotees of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness in a condolence meeting, express our profound bereavement on hearing of the passing of Keśava Gosvāmī Mahārāja, our *sannyāsa guru*.”

Goswami Mahārāja, this evening a number of your godbrothers, disciples, friends, and well-wishers are also expressing our profound bereavement that by the Lord’s mysterious plan you have suddenly been taken from our vision. We are still in shock as to how we have become bereft of one of ISKCON’s great *saṅkīrtana* generals. Each of us feels the loss in a different way. Your godbrothers miss your sweet, Kṛṣṇa conscious association, your disciples miss your loving care, the congregation misses your awe-inspiring leadership, and the newcomers who may be present tonight will miss the chance of ever meeting you, who could charm the hearts of so many conditioned souls by your preaching and bestow upon them the priceless gift of devotional service to Śrīla Prabhupāda and Lord Kṛṣṇa.

As for myself, Goswami Mahārāja, I have lost with your departure a dear friend, a friend who had my real interest at heart and who was willing to extend himself to me on numerous occasions. Our association goes back to the mid-1970s, when each year you, Bhagavān dāsa, and I would take a spiritual retreat to sacred Hrisikesh in the Himalayas. There we would read and chant, swim in the Gaṅgā and hold *kīrtanas*, just the three of us, in the

sacred abode's spiritual atmosphere. It was during these retreats that I imbibed from you (and you alone) a great zeal for the missionary activities of Kṛṣṇa consciousness, for you would always preach to me the glories of the holy name, book distribution, and the making of devotees.

But what amazed me the most was your brilliant plans and strategies for organizing these activities. Recognizing your managerial abilities early in your devotional career, Śrīla Prabhupāda entrusted you with the most responsible services, including being one of the first members of the Governing Body Commission, acquiring and securing the land for our Māyāpur project, and heading up book distribution in America. Śrīla Prabhupāda's supreme love and trust in you was demonstrated by his making you his personal secretary—a service you executed faithfully for many years up to the moment of his departure.

As a result of that service, you had an intimate look into the life of a pure devotee, something that you have shared freely with all of us throughout the years. You were part of a rare breed of devotees, Goswami Mahārāja, devotees who had intimate association with his Divine Grace and who understood his mood and the particular way he did things for Kṛṣṇa. No doubt you earned the most prestigious title any ISKCON devotee could earn, for you were in every way a “Prabhupāda man.”

I first met you when I was a new devotee. You awed me. I revered you—or perhaps it is better to say I was afraid of you. Like a commander leading his troops in Lord Caitanya's army, you instilled those sentiments in your followers in order to push forward the *saṅkīrtana* movement in military fashion.

Unfortunately, some devotees saw you only in that light. They didn't have the good fortune to know your soft heart, your love for the devotees, your thirst for associating with your godbrothers, and your eagerness to attain Vṛndāvana and the loving mood of the Vrajavāsīs.

You once showed me that kinder face when I approached you with the desire to take *sannyāsa* in 1978 at the Gaura-Pūrṇimā festival in India. Being an itinerant preacher since the day I joined the Kṛṣṇa consciousness movement, I had a strong desire to leave household life and enter the renounced order. When I had revealed my desire to my GBC representative,

he had replied, “Ask Tamāl Krishna Mahārāja. If he agrees, I’ll accept your request.”

I was petrified, but I approached you on the Long Building roof and revealed my desire. I expected grueling questions about my plans and motivations. Instead, you sat down with me, and after asking a few questions about my determination to preach, gave me advice on how to practice *sannyāsa* life. I still follow those guidelines.

In 1980 when we were together at the Los Angeles Ratha-yātrā, you pulled me aside and said, “Indra, let’s form a team—you and me. We’ll travel all over America, all over the world, just like I did with Viṣṇujana Mahārāja. You’ll lead *kīrtana* and I’ll speak. We’ll make devotees everywhere.” Goswami Mahārāja, how much I lament now that I didn’t take you up on that offer. I also lament not accepting your many invitations to visit you in Dallas, Vṛndāvana, Cambridge, and Oxford over the years. Of all my godbrothers, I see that you most appreciated and understood the value and need for associating with devotees, especially with godbrothers.

It distresses me that in this lifetime I will not be able to have your association again. I will never again hear your clear, logical, dynamic lectures. Goswami Mahārāja, among all the devotees, you were my favorite speaker on the *Bhāgavatam*. What nectar you could have given us during the next twenty years. It’s hard for me to understand why Kṛṣṇa took you at this particular moment. You had so much to offer. You had so much association with Śrīla Prabhupāda, so much Kṛṣṇa conscious experience, so many ideas for expanding the movement.

And you were on the verge of a new and promising career in devotional service. It can only mean that Kṛṣṇa has a greater plan for you. I’m jealous of those who will soon be serving alongside you. With you, Kṛṣṇa consciousness was full of life—spiritual life.

And it’s not that you didn’t have your problems, Goswami Mahārāja. I remember our long talks in Cambridge last year. You indicated your dissatisfaction with the ways things were developing in some parts of our movement. You also had your opponents and some personal struggles with health. Throughout it all, you remained chaste and loyal to Śrīla Prabhupāda and his ISKCON movement. You were a pillar of strength for oth-

ers, the best of spiritual fathers to your disciples, the best of friends to those who chose to love you, an inspiration for masses of devotees, and you displayed real compassion to the fallen conditioned souls when you underwent incredible austerities during ISKCON's pioneer days and especially as the preaching spread in China.

You were the first in a number of fields, although I saw that you always cultivated a servant's spirit. Now, in typical fashion but in an unlikely way, you are the first of the initiating spiritual masters to be placed in *samādhi* in Māyāpur. Your departure and its circumstances were tragic, but death is always tragic—even more so when it is a devotee who has left the world. With the departure of any devotee, but especially one of your caliber, the world becomes a little less fortunate. Devotees are the only good fortune in Kali-yuga, and there are so few of them. Thus my lamentation is all the deeper today because my beloved disciple, Vṛndāvanēśvarī dāsi, also passed away in the accident with you.

We mourn your loss, Goswami Mahārāja. I know my life will never be the same. *Saṅkīrtana*, our primary activity, is based on teamwork. When one of the primary members is removed from the team, we lose a little of our endurance. Some of the wind is knocked out of us. I'll miss you. I'll miss your presence on the preaching battlefield and miss our discussions on Vraja-bhakti. To whom can I turn now with my questions on how to love Kṛṣṇa?

As tragic as your departure was, it was also glorious. You gave up your body in holy Māyāpur-dhāma, near Phuliyā, the village where Haridāsa Ṭhākura chanted 300,000 names of the Lord every day. You departed on the disappearance day of Jagannātha dāsa Bābājī and Rasikānanda Prabhu. Your *samādhi* ceremony was attended by all our movement's GBC men, many *sannyāsīs*, most of the temple presidents, and masses of devotees. Your *samādhi* ceremony was fitting for a devotee of your stature, a devotee of your accomplishments, a devotee loved by many, many godbrothers, disciples, friends, scholars, and common people.

We were together when my disciple Vraja-lilā passed away in Vṛndāvana in 1997. At that time you said that after her departure she would be in a transcendental position to bless us. Goswami Mahārāja, you are now also

in a transcendental position to bless me. Whether you are back home, back to Godhead, or again serving as our beloved spiritual master's personal secretary as he continues to establish Lord Caitanya's mission, you are blessed, no doubt. Please remember and think fondly of me always.

And Goswami Mahārāja, the next time you ask me to form a team with you, I won't be so foolish as to refuse. I'll happily lead the *kīrtanas* and you can give the classes. I became a *sannyāsī* by your mercy, and I'm ready now to follow you anywhere.

Your servant,
Indradyumna Swami

12

May Lord Nṛsimha Protect Us

March 17–April 4

Since arriving in America almost three weeks ago, Śrī Prahlāda and his wife Rukmiṇī-priyā and I have been on a whirlwind tour of temples. We have been to New York City, Washington, D.C., Boston, Philadelphia, San Jose, and Laguna Beach. We are doing virtually two to three preaching engagements a day. I am no longer able to keep track of all the places we have been. One day is beginning to merge into the next, and I am left with a single impression of continuous lecturing, *kīrtana*, and unending feasts. The intense schedule, lack of regulation, and irregular diet are not conducive to good health, but a traveling preacher must be willing to sacrifice in the line of duty.

In an attempt to keep myself healthy, though, I have been trying to swim in public pools wherever I go. I usually find a temple devotee who belongs to a local gym with a pool, who allows me to accompany him as a guest. Rarely am I able to complete my desired forty-lap regimen, however. Inevitably, someone at the pool wants to speak to me about Kṛṣṇa consciousness.

For example, when I was swimming at the university's pool near the Philadelphia temple, two students, who were also swimming, tapped me on the shoulder. I was reluctant to speak to them, but couldn't really refuse. While other swimmers raced back and forth, and us standing waist-deep in the pool, we had a twenty-minute discussion on karma and reincarnation. Their curiosity satisfied, I began my laps, only to be stopped five minutes later by two professors who wanted to know the difference between the teachings of Śaṅkara and Caitanya. I spent the rest of my exercise time on the side of the pool discussing *acintya-bhedābheda-tattva*, Lord Caitanya's sublime concept of the living entities' simultaneous oneness and difference with God.

Despite the inconvenience of constant travel, I am happy to always be sharing with others the good fortune I received from my spiritual master. However, after losing my dear godbrother Tamāl Krishna Mahārāja and my disciple Vṛndāvanēśvarī two weeks ago, I have been having difficulty addressing the sadness I feel. Memorial observances marking their sudden departures have ended, and the numerous condolences from devotees around the world have stopped pouring in, but as life goes on, those of us who were close to these devotees find that each new day brings fresh reminders that they are gone. Although I try to accept that the Lord showed us His higher plan, I can help but feel bereft of the association of a true friend and loving disciple. This experience has made Śrīla Narottama dāsa Ṭhākura’s words enter deeper into my heart:

se-saba saṅgīra saṅge je kaila vilāsa
se-saṅga nā paiya kānde narottama dāsa

“Being unable to obtain the association of Lord Gaurāṅga, accompanied by all of these devotees in whose association He performed His pastimes, Narottama dāsa simply weeps.” (“*Sapāṣada-bhagavad Viraha-janita-vilāpa*,” from *Prārthanā*)

Nothing can replace the warmth and love of a genuine friend or the service of a genuine disciple.

‘duḥkha-madhye kona duḥkha haya gurutara?’
‘kṛṣṇa-bhakta-viraha vinā duḥkha nāhi dekhi para’

Śrī Caitanya Mahāprabhu asked, “Of all kinds of distress, what is the most painful?”

Śrī Rāmānanda Rāya replied, “Apart from separation from the devotee of Kṛṣṇa, I know of no unbearable unhappiness.” (Cc. *Madhya* 8.248)

As we travel and preach, trying to simultaneously raise funds for our Polish festival tour and share Kṛṣṇa consciousness with the devotees, news arrives constantly from the Polish home front where the other tour devo-

tees are performing a marathon to organize the festival. It is scheduled to begin in May. The day we finished our final program last year, Nandinī dāsī and Rādhā-sakhī-vṛndā began preparations for this year's tour. As usual, our opposition has been close on their heels.

Months ago, Nandinī and Rādhā-sakhī-vṛndā learned that due to the Catholic Church's continuous pressure, all the schools along Poland's Baltic seacoast refused to rent their facilities to us during this year's summer vacation. Each summer, our group of three hundred devotees bases ourselves in the schools, sleeping in the classrooms, showering in the gym facilities, and holding our morning programs in the gymnasiums themselves. Each year we stay in three different schools along the five hundred kilometer coastline, holding festivals in the towns and resorts along the way. That not one school agreed to receive us this year was a major blow.

However, two weeks ago Nandinī phoned me to say that after intense negotiation, one school has agreed to rent us its facilities. It will be difficult to cover the entire coastline from one base, but at least we have a facility.

In preparation for the great Woodstock Festival, scheduled for August 2 and 3 in southern Poland, Nandinī and Rādhā-sakhī-vṛndā went to Zary, the town that hosts the annual event. They wanted to rent the same three schools we have previously used to accommodate the four hundred devotees who participate in our Kṛṣṇa's Village of Peace. By Kṛṣṇa's grace, they were received well in the first two schools. They wrote:

At the first school, the headmistress was excited that we will be guests at her school again. She was praising our cleanliness and tolerance of the austere conditions. Smiling, she said that our devotees made an impressive impact on the whole town last year. In the second school, the headmistress had tears in her eyes, recounting how she was allowed to swing Kṛṣṇa on His birthday. [We celebrated Janmāṣṭamī last year in our tent at Woodstock, which included a swing festival for our Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa Deities.] The headmistress said, "I've had such good luck since swinging your Kṛṣṇa."

But they met resistance at the third and largest school:

When we arrived, the headmaster screamed at us, saying that we were a dangerous cult and that all the people in Zary hated us. “Last year I fell under your influence and rented you the school,” he said. “I couldn’t resist you. You two girls were too powerful for me! But this year I will not come under the sway of your smiling faces and your food!”

But after two hours of discussion (and four or five *samosās*), as well as a phone call from our friend, the Mayor of Zary, the headmaster signed the agreement for renting us the school on the condition that you, Gurudeva, will not reside there! He said, “You have to promise me that your guru will not live in my school. He’s the main problem here. I saw how all of you were serving him. Why are you people so submissive toward him? I have never seen a man command so much respect. Because of him, the whole town of Zary came to know of your Kṛṣṇa!”

When we came out of his office we were exhausted, but we went immediately to the mayor’s office to thank him for his phone call to the headmaster. When we entered, he laughed and said, “The battle has only begun, but I am with you all the way!”

I have no doubt that this year’s four-month festival will be as much of a battle as it has always been. As we make our plans, so too does our opposition, the Church and many members of the government. As our festivals become more successful, they become more determined to stop us. Despite the fact that they have all the resources necessary to impede us, however, including the money to mount defamation campaigns in the media and the power to maneuver around the law, we have continued to succeed. If we stick to our principles and preaching determination, Kṛṣṇa will help us. Śrīla Prabhupāda writes:

If one wants to benefit the entire world, he will certainly find persons who will naturally put forth many impediments. This is natural. But if a devotee seeks shelter at the lotus feet of the Six Gosvāmīs, the merciful Gosvāmīs will certainly give the Lord’s

servitor all protection. It is not astonishing that impediments are placed before those who are spreading the Kṛṣṇa conscious movement all over the world. Nevertheless, if we adhere to the lotus feet of the Six Gosvāmīs and pray for their mercy, all impediments will be annihilated, and the transcendental devotional desire to serve the Supreme Lord will be fulfilled.

—Cc. *Antya* 1.3-4, purport

Such protection can be understood in various ways. The Lord always protects His surrendered devotees from the illusions of the material world, but such protection doesn't necessarily mean a devotee will not face persecution or injury. We saw that when our festival was attacked by ruffians with iron bars last year and many devotees were hurt. Such violence was certainly unjust, but it reflected the glory of a devotee's surrender to the Lord:

“Following the orders of Śrī Caitanya Mahāprabhu, one who preaches the glories of the Lord all over the world or all over the universe should be humbler than grass and more tolerant than a tree because a preacher cannot live an easygoing life. Indeed, a preacher must face many impediments. Not only is he sometimes cursed, but sometimes he must also suffer personal injury. For example, when Nityānanda Prabhu went to preach Kṛṣṇa consciousness to the two roguish brothers Jagāi and Mādhāi, they injured Him and made His head bleed, but nevertheless, He tolerantly delivered the two rogues, who became perfect Vaiṣṇavas. This is the duty of a preacher. Lord Jesus Christ even tolerated crucifixion.” (*Bhāg.* 6.5.44, purport)

To forestall any attacks on our festivals this year, we plan to set up a surveillance system consisting of four cameras to monitor the festival area. Behind the main stage, we'll have two televisions, so we can see what is going on at all times. We will also be hiring a professional security team to guard the events, and requesting local police forces to maintain a constant presence at the festival sites.

Personally, I am willing to take extra measures for my own safety. Several godbrothers who are competent astrologers have warned me to be careful. One wrote, “Your Venus is presently conjoined with Mercury in

the seventh house. This is a *maraca*, a death-inflicting house. In your chart, both Mercury and Venus have the power to cause great damage. Furthermore, you are in a double malefic period, Ketu-Rāhu, and violent Mars, in his own fiery sign of Aries, has become entangled by the Ketu-Rāhu axis. You can definitely expect violence during this juncture. Take personal precautions against serious attack or accident. Scorpio is in the tenth house [career] to your natal moon, so you will have to walk the razor's edge as forces will be working hard to bring you down.”

Astrology can give us helpful foresight. Of course, we depend ultimately upon Kṛṣṇa when an inauspicious period is indicated, but even as dependents we must use our intelligence and exercise precautions when the stars are unfavorable.

Seeing the danger ahead of me, another astrologers went so far as to recommend I cancel this year's tour. “Your chart indicates that you are going into the belly of the beast. This period lasts until February 4, 2003. Would it be out of the way to suggest you visit holy places in India during this juncture?”

But I cannot cancel the tour. If anything, the festivals will create auspiciousness for me and everyone else. Even at risk to my life, Lord Kṛṣṇa's message must be given out to the masses. We will therefore focus on the Lord's desire that we broadcast the holy name in every town and village and leave it up to Him whether we live or die.

*vidikṣu dikṣūrdhvam adbhaḥ samantād
antar bahir bhagavān nārasimhaḥ
prahāpayal loka-bbayanī svanena
sva-tejasā grasta-samasta-tejāḥ*

“Prahāda Mahārāja loudly chanted the holy name of Lord Nṛsiṃhadeva. May Lord Nṛsiṃhadeva, roaring for His devotee Prahāda Mahārāja, protect us from all fear of dangers created by stalwart leaders in all directions through poison, weapons, water, fire, air and so on. May the Lord cover their influence by His own transcendental influence. May Nṛsiṃhadeva protect us in all directions and in all corners, above, below, within and without.” (*Bhāg.* 6.8.34)

13

“In Public Places I Glorify Your Mercy”

April 5–30

We are coming to the end of our two-month preaching tour in America, a program that has had Śrī Prahāda and I crisscross the country six times. Time has passed quickly; when you do something you like, time *passes* quickly. The experience has been intense, and I barely have the physical strength to complete this last week. But the spiritual rewards have been bountiful. Most significantly, we have had the good fortune to touch many people’s hearts with Kṛṣṇa consciousness.

One of the rigors of traveling in America are the numerous security checks at each airport before each flight. Since the terrorist attacks in New York City, most airports throughout the country have tightened security. We travel on inexpensive, one-way tickets, purchased a few days before a flight, so the computer systems automatically notify security personnel to put us through extensive searches.

While passing through security at Jacksonville Airport in Florida last week, the woman examining my carry-on luggage excused herself and went to speak to her superior. I overheard her say, “I’m asking for just two minutes to speak to this man.”

Her superior replied, “But you simply can’t do that! You’re on duty.”

“Please, I beg of you! It’s very important to me.”

Surrendering, her superior said, “All right, but only two minutes.”

Returning to the table where the contents of my bags were strewn, she said with respect, “Sir, my name is Amy. May I ask you a question that is not related to this search? It’s personal. Please?”

Surprised, I replied, “Yes, of course.”

As we sat down near the security table, her superior looked around nervously and motioned to her watch, reminding Amy that she had two minutes.

Amy said, “Many people come through this airport every day, but I have never seen anyone so content, peaceful, and happy as you and your friend. My life is miserable. I have so many problems. Please help me. I’m a Christian. Can you share your secret with me?”

I felt immediate compassion for her. I wondered how in two short minutes I could summarize the entire Kṛṣṇa conscious process, which Śrīla Prabhupāda had once described as a panacea for all problems. I inched my chair closer to hers and said, “This material world is not our real home. We belong in the spiritual world with God, with Kṛṣṇa. All problems are solved when we return to that transcendental abode.”

“What do you call that place?” she asked.

As time was short, I decided to be direct. “It’s called Vṛndāvana. It’s a place free from anxiety. But while here in the material world, we can be aloof from misery by always remembering God. Jesus once said that we must be in this world but not of it.”

“But how can I always remember God? I have to work.”

“If you love someone, you remember them all the time, even when you’re at work, don’t you?”

She smiled as she caught my point.

Anxious that her two minutes were passing, she pressed forward and said, “Can you tell me in a few words how I can learn to love God?”

“By chanting His names. It’s as simple as that.”

Looking over at her superior, who now showed her one finger, indicating that she had only a minute left, Amy said, “Can you show me how to do that?”

“Yes,” I said.

And there in the midst of the hustle and bustle of airport security, with machines flashing and beeping and a long line of impatient passengers awaiting security clearance, I taught her word by word the Hare Kṛṣṇa mantra. Time stood still for those few moments as she closed her eyes and listened carefully.

Then we saw Amy’s superior indicate that it was time for her to return to work, and Amy turned her attention to the next passenger in line. As she started to go through his belongings, I heard her chanting softly to her-

self. When I picked up my baggage and turned to leave, she looked up and smiled, the holy names still on her lips. It was the only reward I had hoped for in our brief exchange. Amy had been greatly blessed by hearing the glories of the holy name; I had been greatly blessed by sharing them with her.

*papadya bhavadiyatam kalita-nirmala premabbir
mabadbbir api kamyate kim api yatra tarnam janub
krtatra kujaner api vraja-vane sthitir me yaya
krpanam krpana-gaminim sadasi naumi tam eva vam*

“In public places I glorify Your mercy, which is granted to even low creatures and which enables me, even though I am lowborn, to live in this forest of Vraja, the place where Your great devotees, filled with pure love, aspire to take birth even as blades of grass.” (Śrī Stava-mālā, Rūpa Gosvāmī, “Utkalika-vallari,” text 65)

14

Ghost-Busting in New York

May 4

The day before flying from New York to London, I went to Manhattan with Bhakta Pankaj to purchase some sound equipment for the Polish tour. It was a cold, drizzly spring day, and people were moving somberly through the streets, making little or no eye contact with one another. Striding through the concrete canyons, engulfed by the enormous buildings towering over us, I felt almost claustrophobic, cut off from the world of nature.

As we walked down Broadway and rounded the corner onto Fulton, we suddenly found ourselves standing adjacent to the former World Trade Center site. The place was eerily silent. It still looked like a scene of destruction. Almost three thousand lives were lost when the towers collapsed. The people watching the clean-up crew now eight months later, were obviously on their way to work, school, or to do their errands; it is impossible to pass by the scene without contemplating the sheer force of the disaster—two jet planes crashing into the tallest buildings in the U.S. Many of today’s watchers were crying.

The entire area was surrounded by a long fence, which extended for several city blocks. The fence has been covered in offerings and prayers for those who had perished in the disaster. Messages read, “Grace and peace to you—Church of the Advent, Spartanburg, South Carolina”, “Our hearts go out to you—Greens High School, Georgia”, “We grieve for you—Kelly’s football team, Nebraska,” etc. There are even offerings from foreign countries: “In Chile we care too.” Old teddy bears, T-shirts, flowers, and even money has been fixed to the fence. No one has stolen any of it.

For a moment I found myself also swept up with emotion, but then I controlled my mind, remembering the *Bhagavad-gītā*’s wisdom:

*dehī nityam avadhyo ’yaṁ,
dehe sarvasya bhārata*

*tasmāt sarvāṇi bhūtāni,
na tvam śocitum arhasi*

“O descendent of Bharata, he who dwells in the body can never be slain. Therefore you need not grieve for any living being.” (Bg. 2.30)

This verse does not mean that the Lord’s devotee is hard-hearted or callous toward others’ suffering. Rather, a devotee feels genuine compassion for the misfortunes of others and tries to solace them by helping them understand the eternality of the soul. At the same time, a devotee has no illusions about the temporality of this world. Neither does he or she expect to find happiness here. Thus when the material nature shows her ugly side, a devotee remains equipoised, even in the midst of great danger: *yasmin stbhitō na duḥkheṇa, guruṇāpi vicālyate*. This means that when one is situated in such knowledge, “even in the midst of greatest difficulty, he is never shaken.” (Bg. 6.23)

After purchasing the sound equipment, we headed back to the temple, but the few minutes we had spent witnessing the sorrow wrought by terrorism made our day even more somber. As the skies darkened and it started to rain, people quickened their steps through the streets. Everything merged into grays—the clouds, people, and buildings all became part of the same landscape. Suddenly, I heard someone call to us, “Hey, I want to speak to you.”

We looked around and saw a man standing on the curb, two wooden sandwich boards hanging over his body. They advertised a local coffee shop.

Pankaj said, “Don’t bother. He looks crazy.”

New York City is full of displaced, homeless, sometimes crazy men, who often accept humiliating jobs in order to survive, but I felt there was something in this man’s voice; it made me feel he was sane.

“Hey, you guys,” he called again. “Come on over. I have something to ask you.”

Pankaj pulled my arm. “Let’s go, Mahārāja. We can’t waste time.”

The man called out again, pleading.

I turned around and pulled Pankaj with me toward the man. Dark-skinned and in his mid-forties, he looked weathered by the street life. His hair was disheveled and his skin was wind-burned. His clothes had also seen better days. As we approached I could see his face more clearly, I could see that his nose had been broken a number of times.

“Thanks, guys,” he said. “I saw your robes and knew you could help me. I have a real problem.”

Pankaj was impatient, probably thinking the man would ramble on and we’d be stuck listening for some time, but there was something about him I trusted.

“My sister just came back from Jamaica, and I think someone put a spell on her. She’s haunted by a ghost! I’ve tried everything to cure her, but nothing works. Can you help me?”

“Sure, we can help you.”

Pankaj looked at me incredulously. I continued, “You can get rid of the ghost simply by chanting God’s name to her. God is all-powerful and is present in the sound of His name. Nothing inauspicious or evil can remain where God’s name is chanted.”

Taking my hand he said, “I believe you, sir. Do you have time to teach me that chant, so I can give it to my sister?”

“Yes, of course.” I smiled, remembering Amy at the Jacksonville Airport. “I’ll write it down, so you won’t forget it.”

Taking out a pen and paper, I carefully wrote out the Hare Kṛṣṇa mantra, then turned to show it to the man. Pointing to the words, I said, “Repeat after me.”

Moving closer and squinting at the paper, he repeated: “Hare Kṛṣṇa, Hare Kṛṣṇa, Kṛṣṇa Kṛṣṇa, . . .”

“Hey, I know that song!” he exclaimed. “I’ve been standing on this corner for five years, and a group of people often come by singing that song. Is that you guys?”

“It must be,” Pankaj was now all smiles.

The man continued, “You know, whenever I hear that song the whole world lights up. Whenever you people come by I do a little dance right here on the corner. I don’t know why I didn’t think of it before. This is the

song that will cure my sister. I believe in this song!” He added with sincerity, “You know, whenever I remember that song I just want to shout out, ‘Hey, everybody, here’s a song that will change your heart, a song that will change the whole world!’”

Pankaj and I were dumbfounded. What was going on here? We had tried to help this man, and it turned out he had helped us. If only I could have just one drop of his faith in the holy name.”

“Thank you very much,” he said, vigorously shaking my hand. “I think God sent you here today. I’m sorry that I’m a poor man and can’t give you anything in return.”

I paused for a moment, and then as we turned to go I said, “Don’t worry, you’ve given us more than you can imagine.”

*ambhaḥ sambarad akhilaṁ sakṛd
udayād eva sakala-lokasya
taraṇir iva timira-jaladbhiṁ
jayati jagan-maṅgalaṁ harer nāma*

“As the rising sun immediately dissipates all the world’s darkness, which is deep like an ocean, so the holy name of the Lord, if chanted once without offenses, dissipates all the reactions of a living being’s sinful life. All glories to that holy name of the Lord, which is auspicious for the entire world.” (*Padyāvalī*, Śrīla Rūpa Gosvāmī, quoting Śrī Lakṣmīdhara)

15

Sat-Sanga in the Sky

May 5–20

On the evening of May 5, I boarded a Virgin Atlantic Airlines flight from New York to London on the first leg of my journey to Poland. As I entered the cabin, I scanned the rows of seats from front to back, hoping there might be a row free so I could lie down and get some much needed rest. This would literally be the first opportunity I'd had in two months to sleep a full six hours—the duration of the flight. I often use flights to catch up on e-mail, arrange study notes, or sort telephone numbers and business cards, little things I don't usually have time to do when I am in the midst of my travels. This time I desperately wanted to sleep. However, as I walked through the cabin, it soon became apparent that the flight was full and that no extra seats would be available.

As I settled into my aisle seat, an airhostess approached and asked if everything was all right. Thinking she was simply doing her duty, I said quickly, "Yes, thank you." But I noticed she didn't go away. Instead she smiled and asked if she could ask a question.

"Yes, of course," I replied.

"My husband and I recently went with a tour group to India. We visited New Delhi, Mumbai, and Pune. Something happened to me on that trip. It's hard to explain. I was so touched by the experiences we had, especially when we visited the temples. I have a lot of questions about spiritual things. Can you answer them for me?"

She seemed so intent that she was prepared to drop her duties and focus on the questions. I said, "We can talk, but maybe now is not the best time. Perhaps later on during the flight."

She looked around, collected herself, and agreed. She added, "Is there anything you require during the flight? A special meal or something?"

"Actually, there is something you can do for me. Please let me know if

there is a row of seats free so I can rest. I'm really tired!"

"Sure," she said, and she turned to show passengers to their seats.

A few minutes later, two women came up the aisle. Their eyes lit up when they saw they had the seats next to mine. As they sat down they smiled, and at the first opportunity one of them introduced herself. "My name is Peggy. From the way you're dressed, it appears you practice yoga."

"Yes," I said. "I practice a form of yoga called *bhakti-yoga*, the yoga of love and devotion."

Peggy said, "My friend Martha and I recently became interested in yoga, but we realize that there's more to it than just the exercises. Can you answer a few questions for us?"

I thought, "What about my rest?!"

Before I had time to reply, however, the airhostess reappeared and said, "Sir, I've arranged a row of seats for you at the back. Come quickly, the flight is about to take off."

When Peggy heard that I was going to move, she grabbed my arm and pleaded, "No, please don't move. We want to talk to you. We have some important questions to ask!" The airhostess added, "Actually, it would be nice if you stayed here, because this is the section of the plane where I do my service. Later on in the flight, all of us can discuss together."

I envisioned the row of seats and the sound sleep awaiting. It was already 10:00 P.M. and I was ready to crash. I couldn't believe this was happening. But as I looked at the three women, each eager to learn about spiritual life, I realized I couldn't let them down. I agreed to stay.

With that Peggy and Martha launched into a series of questions about the soul, God, and the spiritual world. They were so absorbed that they refused the drinks and meals served by our hostess, who took every opportunity to listen in whenever she walked by.

Two hours later, most people on the flight had fallen asleep. Taking advantage of the break in her routine, the airhostess came by and joined our *sat-saṅga* in the sky. In fact, she brought the discussion to an even higher level when she asked about how best to realize God according to the Indian scriptures. As I began to explain the glories of chanting Hare Kṛṣṇa, all three women listened attentively.

By one in the morning, I could hardly keep my eyes open, and neither could the inquisitive souls huddled around me. As we sped through the air at eight hundred kilometers an hour, Peggy and Martha nodded off to sleep for a few moments. I thought, “Now is my chance to sleep.” But each time I began to fall asleep, one of them woke up and asked another question: “What about reincarnation?” or, “If God were all loving, why is there evil in the world?” or, “You said God was a person. Can you describe Him?”

We talked like that for more than five hours! Only during the last half hour of the flight did they fall silent—because they had to use the restroom. There was no time to sleep; I took out my beads and began to chant Hare Kṛṣṇa. My condition could only be described as blissful exhaustion.

Just before deplaning, Martha turned to me and said, “I’ve never enjoyed a flight as much as this one. We learned so many new and wonderful things! I especially enjoyed your description of God and that place called Vṛndā—something—what is it called?”

“Vṛndāvana.”

“Yes, Vṛndāvana,” she repeated.

“Will you have time to keep in touch with us by e-mail?”

“Yes, of course,” I said, and I wrote down my e-mail address for her. “I’ll make time. It’s the duty of a traveling preacher.”

*mādhavya madhuraṅga kanana-pada praptadbirajya-śrīya
vṛndaranya-vikasi-saurabha-tate tapiccha-kalpa-druma
nottapam jagad eva yasya bbajate kīrti-cchaṭa-cchayaya
citra tasya tavaṅgri-sannidhi-juṣam kim va phalaptir nṛnam*

“O handsome, fragrant *tamāla* desire tree [Kṛṣṇa] blooming in Vṛndāvana forest and embraced by the *mādhavi* vine of the goddess ruling this forest. O tree, the shade of whose glory protects the world from a host of burning sufferings, what wonderful fruits do the people find at Your feet?” (*Śrī Stava-mālā*, “*Utkalika-vallari*,” text 66)

16

Into the Belly of the Beast

May 20–30

As my flight circled Warsaw airport, awaiting permission to land, my heart beat strong in anticipation of the great adventure ahead. This year marks the twelfth anniversary of our Polish tour. Most of the two hundred devotees who attend the tour from fifteen countries had assembled at our spring base several weeks ago, and had been cleaning and repairing our thirty-two tons of festival equipment, including the fifteen-meter stage, the sound gear, lights, tents, kitchen paraphernalia, and trucks.

When the plane landed and I was waiting in line for immigration clearance, I called Nandinī and Rādhā-sakhī-vṛndā on my cell phone. They have been busy organizing festival venues for months. We were in touch throughout the year, but during the past month we had had little contact due to my intense travel schedule. When I reached Nandinī, I asked her for an update.

“We’ve managed to arrange only four of the eight two-day festivals planned for the spring tour. Town officials are generally interested, but our opposition has been active and is causing numerous problems. The deputy mayor of Swiecie, who happens to be the head of a political party in the region called Catholic Action, is particularly against us. When we approached him to do a festival in his town, he laughed and said he would not grant us permission in a hundred years. We are almost certain that due to his influence, Chelmno, the second-largest town in the region, has also refused.”

As I waited, my mind raced with ideas how to counteract this man’s opposition. I said, “I think you should approach him again. Show him the many references and appreciations we have from mayors throughout the country.”

Nandinī said, “We did approach him a second time. When we told him that many people in the region know us because they have attended

our summer festivals on the Baltic coast—and that elections are pending—he fell silent.”

“Do we have that many sympathizers?” I asked.

“Of course, Gurudeva,” Nandini replied. “We’ve covered most of Poland with our festivals during the past twelve years. Just last year we hosted more than 750,000 people, if we include Woodstock. Almost all of them went away with a favorable impression of Kṛṣṇa consciousness. It means we have many sympathizers throughout the country. However, we don’t expect Swiecie’s deputy mayor to remain silent for long.”

As I presented my passport to the immigration officer, I realized I was back on the battlefield. For a traveling preacher, Poland offers a unique blend of friendliness and hostility. People either love us or they despise us. When they love us, they do so with all their hearts, and when they despise us, they have a similar intensity.

The immigration officer entered my name into the computer, then hesitated. He was obviously not one of our sympathizers. Taking his stamp, he gave me a hard stare, then with a scowl, granted me permission to enter the country. As if to add insult to injury, as I walked into the airport’s arrivals hall, I was reminded of the Catholic Church’s ten-year campaign that depicted Kṛṣṇa consciousness as a cult: almost everyone was staring at me with a distrustful look. Was I in fact walking into the belly of the beast, as the astrologer had warned?

My hopes rose, however, when I met the devotees at the far end of the hall. Then several people looked at me and smiled. One man in particular was friendly. He said heartily, “Hare Kṛṣṇa!” He filled me with the confidence that even if I was walking into Aghāsura’s belly, Kṛṣṇa would be there to rescue me.

When I arrived at our hotel base, the devotees greeted me with a rousing *kīrtana*. We had all been waiting for the moment when we could begin this year’s festivals; many of us had been preparing for it since last year’s festivals were complete. A part of my preparation was to purify my heart by spending a few months in holy Vṛndāvana, hearing and chanting. Successful preaching depends more on purity than on elaborate planning, capital,

or facility. When preparing to preach, I try to consider the formula Śrīla Prabhupāda gave: preaching is the essence, books are the basis, utility is the principle, and purity is the force. While in Vṛndāvana I became attached to that transcendental abode. I thought the only reason to leave was to preach in Western countries and thus receive the full mercy of Vraja’s queen, Śrīmatī Rādhārāṇī:

*yathā yathā gaura padāravinde
vīndeta bhaktīm kṛta-puṇya-rāśiḥ
tathā tathosarpati bṛḍy akasmā
rādhā-padāmbhoja sudhāmbu rāśiḥ*

“To the degree that we surrender to Lord Caitanya’s service we gain qualification to serve Rādhārāṇī’s lotus feet in Vraja.” (*Vṛndāvana-mahimāmṛta*, Śataka 8, text 88)

In my arrival lecture to the festival devotees, I emphasized that we had all inherited a great responsibility from Śrīla Prabhupāda to continue his preaching mission. Generally such responsibility is entrusted only to the Lord’s most confidential servants. When Lord Caitanya wanted to liberate Bengal, He sent His dearest Lord Nityānanda. In time, the deliverance of Orissa was entrusted to Śyāmānanda Paṇḍita. More recently, it was our beloved Śrīla Prabhupāda who had been awarded the task of saving the whole world. Now, however, Prabhupāda’s mission had been entrusted to his followers, his disciples and granddisciples. What qualifications do we have in comparison to those who have borne the torch of transcendental knowledge in the past? Śrīla Prabhupāda once said that just as Lord Rāma conquered Rāvaṇa with monkeys and bears, Prabhupāda was conquering the world with his own monkeys and bears. But monkeys and bears can be made into pure devotees by the Lord’s mercy. Mahāprabhu demonstrated this in the Jhārikhaṇḍa forest. There is hope for the world if we, as Śrīla Prabhupāda’s followers, adhere to his lotus footsteps.

After my lecture, Nandini, Rādhā-sakhī-vṛndā, and Vara-nāyaka dāsa, the internal affairs manager of the festival, came to see me. They asked if

I wanted to hear more about the recent victories and setbacks. “*Āyurveda* recommends bitter before sweet,” I responded.

Rādhā-sakhī-ṛndā’s face became grave. “Someone is calling the towns where we have already organized festivals saying he is the mayor of Szczecinek, which is more than two hundred kilometers away. This man is informing the town councils that he allowed our festival in his town last year, and that it was not well received by the citizens. He is telling them we are a dangerous cult and that they have evidence that we put drugs in the food we distribute. He is strongly recommending that the other town councils cancel our festival.”

I began to tremble with anger. “This is the same nonsense someone tried last year. But they didn’t get away with it!”

“But this time it’s working. The council in Czluchow has informed us that it has canceled our festival. It’s such a shame, because it is a beautiful town.”

I remembered a quotation from my high school days as an anti-war demonstrator: “In time of war, the first casualty is truth.” (Boake Carter) I said, “You have to go back to Czluchow and tell the council the truth.”

Within minutes, Nandinī and Rādhā-sakhī-ṛndā were on their way to Czluchow. By Kṛṣṇa’s arrangement the town council was in session when they arrived, and after pleading with the secretary, the two women were allowed to enter. Coming before the assembly of twelve councilors, they explained that the telephone call from Szczecinek was a fraud, and that we are representatives of a bona fide spiritual tradition. We simply want to share the Vedic culture with the people of their town. It didn’t take long to convince the councilors that the call was phony—a call to the actual mayor of Szczecinek was sufficient to clear that up—but just when Nandinī and Rādhā-sakhī-ṛndā thought they had won, the plot thickened.

When Rādhā-sakhī-ṛndā asked, “Will you give us back the permission for the festival?” confident that the councilors would comply, she was met with silence.

“What’s the problem?” she asked. “The Mayor of Szczecinek said he loved our festival last year. Why are you hesitating to grant us permission?”

Still no response. Nandinī said, “You must tell us why you are hesitating. We can answer any doubts you have. We have nothing to hide.”

Finally, the mayor said, “There’s another, more important reason why we cannot allow this festival to take place in our town.”

“What could it possibly be?” Nandinī demanded.

“It’s Indradyumna Swami,” the mayor replied.

Nandinī and Rādhā-sakhī-vṛndā were shocked that the mayor knew me by name—he even pronounced it properly.

“We can’t allow your leader to come to our town.”

Gathering herself, Nandinī asked, “Why not? He’s simply a priest representing the spiritual culture of India.”

“That may be so,” the mayor said, “but he’s also a charismatic American preacher. Many of us have heard his lectures and we don’t want him speaking in our town. We are Christians.”

Surprised, Nandinī said, “You’ve heard his lectures?”

“Of course. He’s been lecturing at your festivals in Poland for over a decade, and you know as well as I do that your festivals are famous throughout this country. I heard him speak personally in Kolobrzeg two summers ago.”

Thinking quickly, Nandinī inquired if the mayor had liked the festival.

“Yes, I did,” he replied, “it was run very professionally.”

Sticking to this tack, Nandinī asked, “What if we bring Indradyumna Swami to a council meeting? He can tell you personally what he will say in his lecture at the festival. Surely he can speak on cultural matters if you prefer he didn’t address spiritual matters. If you don’t find anything offensive in what he presents, you can grant us permission for the event.”

The mayor thought for a moment, then asked the councilors if they would agree to this proposal. Eventually each member raised his or her hand in confirmation. They decided that I should come to the council offices on the morning of the festival. Nandinī’s quick thinking had saved the day.

I was waiting for the women when they returned to the base. I was amazed by Kṛṣṇa’s mercy—and their diplomacy. When they asked if I

wanted to hear more good news, I agreed and quoted a part of Lord Caitanya's *Śikṣāṣṭakam: param vijayate śrī-kṛṣṇa-saṅkīrtanam*—"Let there be all victory for the chanting of Lord Kṛṣṇa's holy names!"

Nandini continued, "You remember how we told you that the deputy mayor of Swiecie refused to grant us permission even in one hundred years?"

"Yes, how could I forget?"

"Well, yesterday we met a lady who came to one of our festivals on the coast last summer. She told us how much she and her husband had enjoyed the event. It turns out that she's a well-known psychologist in Poland and highly respected in Swiecie. When she discovered that the deputy mayor had denied us permission, she personally visited the mayor in his office and complained. The mayor then sent us a message that he wants to speak to us early next week. It appears there is still hope for the Swiecie festival."

"This is excellent news!" I replied.

"But we should never underestimate our opposition," Rādhā-sakhī-ṁṁdā cautioned. "Who knows what they are planning next? The more success we have, the more determined they become."

"Yes," I said, "let's see what happens tomorrow when we hold the first festival of the tour in Tuchola."

Our caravan of trucks, buses, and cars drove the forty kilometers from the base to Tuchola. As a crew of thirty devotees set up the festival site, our *harināma* party chanted and danced through the town, handing out invitations. This was the third time we had performed *harināma* in the town, and the people were warm and friendly. I envisioned a successful festival.

My dream came true when that afternoon a crowd of more than six thousand attended. It was a bright, sunny spring day, and people were happy to browse through our twenty tents packed with displays, shops, and restaurants. As always, the stage show captivated people for more than five hours. The director of the Culture House in Tuchola, who helped organize the festival, later told us that our stage show was the biggest event anyone could recall in the town. It wasn't the first time I have heard such comments.

We savored our victory as we drove home. I told Śrī Prahlāda, “So much mercy went out, so many books were sold, so many people heard the holy names, and so many people took *prasādam*. It seems it will never end. We just keep going year after year.”

“Yes,” Śrī Prahlāda replied, “*ānandāmbudhi-varḍhanam*: Kṛṣṇa consciousness is blissful whenever it’s expanding.”

When we reached our base, none of us could stop talking about the festival’s sweetness. Our opposition seemed so far away all of the sudden, unable harm us.

Suddenly Vara-nāyaka ran into my room. “Gurudeva, we found a microphone in the wall in Nandinī and Rādhā-sakhī-vṛndā’s room. Someone has been eavesdropping!” He handed me a professional miniature microphone and radio transmitter. Vara-nāyaka told me that a devotee had been listening to the BBC on her radio and was shocked to hear Nandinī and Rādhā-sakhī-vṛndā discussing the festival’s success. Curious, she rushed to their room. When Rādhā-sakhī-vṛndā was told that their voices had been transmitted over the radio, she and Nandinī searched their room for almost an hour. Eventually, they found the microphone and transmitter hidden behind a raised piece of wallpaper and disconnected the device.

Our elation at the success of the Tuchola festival ended suddenly as we pondered who could have bugged the women’s room and why. When we approached the hotel owner about the incident, he said, “It seems someone is intent on learning of your plans. During the past few days I have received a number of calls from someone asking questions about your group. When I demanded to know to whom I was speaking, the person hung up. You’d better be careful.”

We stayed up until early the next morning to discuss our strategy. Our opposition obviously had stepped up its efforts and had begun using sophisticated technology to derail our program. We would have to use extreme caution. It occurred to me that the next few months of blissful preaching would be mixed with the anxiety of pondering the opposition’s next move and responding accordingly.

Nevertheless, we realized that devotees have one advantage over this type of opposition: we have the Lord’s mercy. The Lord protects His sur-

rendered servants. If we remain pure in habit and focused on our preaching mission, we will always be successful. We should not doubt that.

*durgeṣv aṭavy-āji-mukhādiṣu prabbuḥ
pāyān nṛsimbo 'sura-yūthapāriḥ
vimuñcato yasya āṭṭa-bāsam
diśo vinedur nyapatamś ca garbhāḥ*

“May Lord Nṛsimhadeva, who appeared as the enemy of Hiraṇyakaśipu, protect me in all directions. His loud laughing vibrated in all directions and caused the pregnant wives of the *asuras* to have miscarriages. May that Lord be kind enough to protect me in difficult places like the forest and battle-front.”

17

The Festivals Begin

May 30–June 4

After much discussion, we decided not to call the local police about the microphone and radio transmitter. We already knew their investigation would not go far. Last year, while investigating the attack on our festival in Tomaszow Mazowiecka, the police discovered that it had been carried out by nine young men from a nearby Catholic seminary. The culprits were never brought to justice. Had they been, the investigating policemen would have lost their jobs.

The only action we can take in the current case is preventative. We have hired one of the best security companies in Poland to protect our festivals. The company has advised us to secure our vehicles at our base each night to prevent tampering. We will also be installing a professional surveillance system consisting of four cameras at the base and at the festivals.

But tensions ran high among the devotees as we set up the second spring festival in Naklo. We were able to relax a little, however, when the chief of the security group told us they could handle any situation and that we shouldn't worry. As crowds of people began to flow into the festival grounds, we became locked into our duties and oblivious to material danger. The festival's blissful mood quickly absorbed our guests, and the program went on as it always does, engaging thousands of conditioned souls in various spiritual activities.

We held the Naklo festival in an outdoor amphitheater. The police estimated that four thousand people attended the first day, but only fifteen hundred the second because of intermittent rain. On the second day, those fifteen hundred people sat in the amphitheater, peering out from under a sea of colorful umbrellas.

The day after the Naklo festival, I asked Vara-nāyaka dāsa, Nandinī,

and Rādhā-sakhī-ṛndā when they would meet the mayor of Swiece. Although the town's deputy mayor, the head of the Catholic Action Party, had refused us permission for the festival, the mayor was considering granting permission after a well-known psychologist approached him requesting him to do so. Days were passing now, and we had not heard anything. I was beginning to think the mayor might have succumbed to the pressure.

That evening, Vara-nāyaka received confirmation from Swiecie that permission had been granted. He was offered no explanation. However, I wanted to know how Kṛṣṇa's mercy had unfolded, so I asked Nandinī to call the psychologist and inquire if she had helped the decision. The psychologist laughed and said, "Yes, of course my intervention helped. When I visited the mayor for the second time, I could see that he was hesitating. I returned two days later with a long list of signatures from the citizens of Swiecie demanding the Festival of India. I told him there were many more people ready to sign the petition and even demonstrate in front of the town hall. Hearing that, he granted his permission."

The next morning as we prepared for *harināma* in Sepolno, the site of our third festival, I found my disciple, Jayatām dāsa, sitting in our temple room writing a letter. When I inquired to whom he was writing, he replied that he was writing to an eighteen-year-old girl who had just taken serious interest in Kṛṣṇa consciousness. Her father had recently died of cancer. For years the father had been studying *Bhagavad-gītā*, which he had purchased from a devotee on the street of his town. Afraid that his family members would not understand his deep interest in an Eastern religion, he had kept the book hidden. When about to die, with his family members surrounding his bed, he told his daughter to look behind the bookshelf and pull out a book wrapped in white cloth. Reaching behind the bookshelf and finding the *Bhagavad-gītā*, she handed it to her father. He unwrapped the book with trembling hands and returned it to his daughter. With his dying breath he told his daughter to follow the path of spirituality the book described.

After her father's departure, the daughter studied the *Bhagavad-gītā*, and when she finished, she visited the nearest Hare Kṛṣṇa temple, buying more books and a set of *japa* beads.

We spent two days doing *barināma* in Sepolno. On our first day in the town, I remembered that we had done a festival there three years ago. I called Nandini and questioned the logic of coming back so soon. “We were just here a few years ago. It seems early to return. I can’t image many people coming.”

On the day of the festival, we received information that the local priest had made a pronouncement: any children who attended our festival would be denied Holy Communion and thus salvation. We also learned that teachers in the local schools were warning their students not to attend the festival because we were a “dangerous cult.”

My hopes for a successful festival dimmed further when dark clouds filled the sky the morning of the event. Rain is our ultimate opposition, and there is certainly nothing we can do when it pours on our programs. “If it should rain,” I thought, “combined with all the other factors, this festival will surely be a disaster.”

When I arrived at the festival site in the afternoon I almost lost all hope. The city authorities had allotted us a beautiful park in the center of town, but the festival crew had set the festival up in a nearby dirt parking lot on top of a grassy knoll. By the time I arrived, it was too late to correct the error (it takes six hours to set up a festival and five hours to break it down).

An hour before the festival began, the clouds opened and it began to rain torrentially. I watched the parking lot encircling the grassy knoll become a sea of mud. There was no way people would come to a festival in that mud. I decided to take a nap in the back of my van.

But an hour later a devotee woke me, saying, “Gurudeva, look at this. You’re not going to believe it!”

I sat up and looked out the window. To my amazement, hundreds of people with umbrellas were walking toward the festival. “It’s nice they’re coming,” I said, “but how in the world are they going to get into the festival? Look at the mud!”

To my astonishment, people began to wade slowly through the mud. At first only a few brave souls negotiated it, but then others also began to step into the mud and onto the grassy knoll. Then a resourceful man took some stones and planks of wood and created an impromptu bridge across

the mud. Throughout the rest of the afternoon and evening that bridge served its purpose, as more than eighteen hundred people crossed over the mud to the festival.

I was so astonished by the people's determination that at one point I asked Jayatām to ask them why they were so intent on coming to the festival despite the fact that we had been there only a few years ago and that they had to negotiate a sea of mud. I was amazed by their response. Most of them remembered the last festival and had enjoyed it so much that there was "nothing in the world that could stop us from coming back again," as one man put it.

My apprehensions had been unfounded. Neither time nor bad publicity nor foul weather nor mud can keep people away from a festival once they have tasted the bliss. I marveled at Lord Caitanya's mercy and His ability to attract conditioned souls to His lotus feet. As the festival concluded, I looked to the sky beyond the dark clouds and rain and tried to envision the beautiful form of that golden *avatāra*, whose mercy is greater than that of any previous incarnation.

*rakṣo-daitya-kulam hatam kiyad idam yogādi-vartma-kriyā-
mārgo vā prakāṣi-kṛtaḥ kiyad idam sṛṣṭy-ādikaṁ vā kiyat
mediny-uddharaṇādikaṁ kiyad idam premojjvalāyā mahā-
bhakter vartma-karim pāram bhagavataś caitanya-mūrtim stumhaḥ*

"What benefit did the world attain when Lord Rāma, Lord Nṛsimha, and many other incarnations of Godhead killed so many *rākṣasa* and *daitya* demons? How important is it that Lord Kapila and other incarnations revealed the paths of *sāṅkhya* and yoga? How glorious is it that Lord Brahmā and other *guṇa-avatāras* create, maintain, and destroy the material universes? How auspicious is it that Lord Varāha lifted the earth from the Garbhodaka Ocean? We do not consider any of these activities to be very important. The most important thing is that Lord Caitanya has revealed the great splendor of pure love of Kṛṣṇa. Let us glorify that Lord Caitanya Mahāprabhu!" (*Śrī Caitanya-candrāmṛta*, Chapter 1, text 7)

18

Were Our Enemies Sleeping?

June 5–12

Chelmza was the site of our fourth festival. Chelmza is a town of 23,000 people. Ranked as one of the poorest towns in Poland, with twenty-eight percent of the population unemployed, I was uncertain how the festival would be received. Previous experience has shown that such towns can be trouble spots for crime, because the youth are restless or bored and often willing to cause trouble. However, by Kṛṣṇa’s mercy the Chelmza festival turned out to be one of the best ever.

The first indication that it would be successful came when sixty of us went on *barināma* the day before the festival. As if obeying a signal from heaven, the cold, rainy weather cleared and a warm sun appeared when we stepped from our bus. It couldn’t have been better timing, because as we began to sing our way down the street, people poured out of the shops to greet both us and the sun. They clapped and waved as we passed, and many of the people who remained inside the shops and apartments smiled at us through the windows. School was let out just after our arrival in the town, and it wasn’t long before crowds of curious children began to follow the *barināma*. Not long after that, many began to dance alongside us, while others walked along, holding the devotees’ hands. Their innocence and immediate trust amazed me.

Contrary to my expectations, the town was beautiful, with well-maintained buildings that date back to the fifteenth century, when Germany occupied the area. Somehow, the architecture was spared the ravages of World War II, although bombers destroyed many of the cities in the region. As we chanted down the cobblestone streets, a devotee and I entered a store to buy a bottle of water. When the shopkeeper attended to us, I remarked on the friendliness of the town’s citizens.

“Why should it be otherwise?” he asked.

I told him that a poor town often equals frustration and lawlessness.

He leaned over the counter and said, “Not in Chelmza. There is a prophecy that because so many saints were born here in previous times, no evil will ever touch this city.”

The next day we held the festival in the best possible spot in town, the center square. There is a saying that three things are essential for the success of a new venture in any town: location, location, location. That our festival occupied the prime site in town certainly contributed to the fact that an estimated ten thousand people attended on the first day. It was another beautiful spring day, and the square was packed with people hours before we opened. It was the type of festival I have often dreamed of, perfect in all respects. With so many devotional engagements for the people—*kirtana*, drama, *prasādam*, and association—the square was transformed into Vaikuṅṭha, a veritable *dhāma*.

On the second day, I asked many of the children what their teachers had said about the previous day’s activities. All of them responded favorably, saying that many of their teachers had attended and had then encouraged the children to do so. A local nun even attended to spray holy water on the crowd. When I stepped forward submissively to receive the mercy, she hesitated, then doused me with a big burst of water.

From the stage I gave a straightforward lecture about love of God. When I mentioned that in order to achieve such an exalted goal one must live a pure and exemplary life, there were cheers of appreciation. As I descended from the stage, a number of mothers called loudly to their children, “Follow him! Follow him!” For the rest of the afternoon I had thirty loving children tagging along with me.

The last *kirtana* continued for over ninety minutes, and when it was over, the crowd demanded more. We tried to carry on, but it was well after 10:30 P.M. and the police were gently prodding us to finish.

As we loaded our equipment onto the trucks, I wondered if our enemies had been asleep for the past two days. We had actually encountered no problems. Could it be that our opposition was in retreat? In a statement in his purport to *Bhāgavatam* 10.2.17, Śrīla Prabhupāda refers in the singular to a preacher who spreads the glories of the holy name. I beg his mercy

to change his purport to the plural, giving credit to the many wonderful devotees on this tour whose selfless service Kṛṣṇa rewards with such dream-like Vaikuṅṭha festivals:

Any place where the Supreme Personality of Godhead is present by His name, form, qualities or paraphernalia immediately becomes a *dhāma*. For example, we speak of Vṛndavana-dhāma, Dvārakā-dhāma and Mathurā-dhāma because in these places the name, fame, qualities and paraphernalia of the Supreme Godhead are always present. Similarly, if devotees of the Lord are empowered by the Supreme Personality of Godhead to do something, the core of their hearts become a *dhāma*, and thus they become so extraordinarily powerful that not only their enemies but also people in general are astonished to observe their activities. Because they are unapproachable, their enemies are simply struck with wonder.

19

“Sirs, This Is the Problem”

June 14–27

The punch sent me reeling and knocked me senseless. When I came to, my U.S. Marine Corps drill instructor was straddling me. He was as angry as a hornet. He had caught me relaxing in my foxhole as a rival platoon overran our position in the hills of Camp Pendleton, California, during an exercise in 1968. He yelled, “Never, and I repeat, never assume the enemy is sleeping. While you are taking a break in your foxhole, the enemy has attacked your flank and overrun you.”

Last week, his instructions rang true. I was discussing with several devotees the success of the festival in Chelmza and how it appeared our opposition was sleeping. Then my cell phone rang. It was Rādhā-sakhī-ṛndā. “Gurudeva, we have a serious problem. We’re receiving reports that a group of priests are traveling along the Baltic Sea coast, campaigning against us among town officials and school administrators. We’re afraid we may lose the school facility in Swierzno, the only one we’ve been able to rent for a summer base.” As she spoke, I remembered how last year another group of priests had made a similar move, convincing all but that one school not to cooperate with our tour. “They’ll be in Swierzno soon,” Rādhā-sakhī-ṛndā said. “We fear the worst. What should we do?”

“Never, and I repeat, never assume the enemy is sleeping,” I said, more to myself than to her.

“What, Gurudeva?”

“Oh, nothing. But as for losing the school in Swierzno, I would say that you should go there and be frank with the director. Explain our concerns. He knows us well.”

Reflecting on the school problem, I realized it was only a matter of time before the school succumbed to the Church’s pressure and our annual tour would be jeopardized. If we don’t have a school for a base, we are forced to

rent hotel rooms, which is too expensive. We had to find a solution.

I decided to take a walk. There is a lake near this base, and a colony of beavers living on that lake. I walked past their dam and into the beautiful forested area. As pressure mounts, I need such places to reflect on the situation. I sat on a rock near the dam and considered the priests' strategy. They know how dependent we are on using the schools for bases. As hard as I tried, though, I couldn't figure out a way to stop them from stirring up trouble for us. Negotiating with them is not an option, because every time we approach the Church they refuse to speak to us. I thought of a few friendly priests we know, but realized they would prove ineffective in such a situation. I recalled Śrīla Prabhupāda's instructions to his disciples in Vṛndāvana in 1975 to pray to Śrī Śrī Gaura-Nitāi to ask them to do the needful. So I bowed my head and folded my hands. I prayed as Prabhupāda advised: "Sirs, this is the problem."

A while later, I walked over to the beaver dam. I saw it provided a formidable protection for the beavers' dens within. The sun was just setting, and the beavers were beginning to swim around the lake under the cover of descending darkness. As they swam away from the dam, I moved closer to it. I realized that to build such a dam, the beavers would have had to fell many trees with their sharp teeth. Only the previous day I had overheard some local people calling them a menace because of the damage they inflict on the environment. I laughed and thought, "Nevertheless, no one can remove them now. They're here to stay—and their home is so interesting that even the locals come to marvel!"

Suddenly I wheeled. "That's it!" I cried.

That evening at a tour management meeting, I offered a solution to our problem of a summer base: we should purchase property somewhere along the Baltic Sea and build a permanent base for the festival. "If we have our own land," I said, "no one will be able to remove us, and if we gradually develop the project as an attractive extension of the tour, even our opposition will come to marvel."

Understanding that next year we may not have an alternative, we decided in favor of purchasing land. Nandinī and Rādhā-sakhī-vṛndā left immediately for Swierzno to speak to the school director—and to look for land.

Two days later we held our festival in Swiecie. To recognize the psychologist friend who had worked to get us permission, we asked her to open the event. Standing before the large audience she thanked us for sharing India's culture. Addressing the concerns of those who did not approve of us, she said that "with Poland on the verge of joining the European Union, we need exposure to other cultures so we can prepare for integration. We are indebted to these people for helping us."

The next day we held *harināma* to advertise our festival in Czluchow. This is the town where the councilors had insisted on hearing what I would say in my festival lecture before we would be allowed to stage the event. Czluchow is an ancient town; the castle ramparts were built more than a thousand years ago and provide a major tourist attraction. Occupied at various times by Crusaders, Swedes, Austrians, Germans, and Poles, the castle was the scene of many battles. There is an inscription at the castle's entrance that states that the castle was so formidable that upon seeing it, many armies would refuse to attack it.

At the time of our festival, Czluchow was preparing to celebrate its City Days, a tradition in Poland where for one week each year, every city honors its history with a festival. By Kṛṣṇa's arrangement, the authorities had planned our festival to coincide with their own. Our colorful festival posters hung alongside the town's announcing the week's events. Workers were busy hanging banners and streamers throughout the streets.

With celebration in the air, people eagerly took our invitations. I told Śrī Prahlāda that we wouldn't have to worry about people coming to our festival—we had distributed ten thousand invitations in a town with a population of twenty-one thousand!

But disaster almost struck before our festival began. Just as we arrived back at our base to prepare for the festival's set-up, the woman in charge of cultural affairs in Czluchow called Vara-nāyaka dāsa and said, "I'm sorry, but you are no longer welcome in our town. The mayor has officially canceled your festival."

Vara-nāyaka has had plenty of experience in dealing with such situations. He asked calmly, "What possible reason could there be for canceling us?"

“The priest has just informed the mayor that you are spreading religious propaganda in the town. He said your leaflets encourage people to leave their religion and join yours.”

Vara-nāyaka replied, “That is simply not true. The only thing we distributed today were invitations to our festival—the same invitation we showed you when we first discussed the event months ago.”

“Really?” the lady asked. “If that’s so, I’ll contact the priest and the mayor. I’ll call you back in half an hour.”

We waited anxiously for her call. Once again I folded my hands and prayed to Gaura-Nitāi, “Sirs, this is the problem . . .”

Thirty minutes later, Vara-nāyaka’s cell phone rang. After a few moments we saw him smile. He told us, “The woman from the Culture House apologized and the mayor has invited us to be official participants in the town parade tomorrow.” Gaura-Nitāi had indeed done the needful.

The next morning nearly one hundred devotees and I left early to join the town parade. I wasn’t sure what to expect, but when we arrived I was amazed at the opportunity the Lord was providing. There were more than four hundred people (including many children) ready to march, all dressed as medieval kings and queens, armored soldiers, jesters and jugglers, musicians and dancers. Their costumes were so real that it was as if we had been transported through time. The parade organizers were surprised when they saw us, but greeted us warmly and directed us to our position in the parade. When I asked if we could play our instruments and chant and dance during the parade, they happily agreed.

When the parade started we began a soft *kīrtana*, which grew louder and more enthusiastic as we proceeded through the streets. We were the only participants who had amplification, and soon our *kīrtana* engulfed the entire parade. No one complained. In fact, after a while, many of the parade participants were dancing along with the devotees. People lining the streets and watching from their apartment windows appeared to love it, and many were clapping in time with the *mṛdaṅgas* and *karatālas*. At one point, I left the parade and joined the spectators lining the street. To my astonishment, it appeared that the parade was one gigantic *barināma* party winding through the town’s streets. All I could hear was the holy name, and ev-

ery movement seemed to coincide with the *kīrtana*. All the while, the devotees were moving through the crowd, distributing invitations to our festival. I imagined that whoever hadn't received an invitation the previous day would surely have received one today.

By the time the parade reached the center square, our *kīrtana* was bouncing off the town's old walls. I couldn't distinguish between the *kīrtana* and its echo. The holy names were crisscrossing the square in all directions, and the devotees were twirling and dancing. Everyone loved it, and when the parade came to a halt in front of a large platform full of dignitaries, the organizers told us to keep chanting! So we did as the entire town looked on. For a few moments I stood watching in amazement, enchanted by Caitanya Mahāprabhu's incredible mercy.

tribhuvana-kamaṇīye gauracandre 'vatīrṇe
patita-yavana-mūrkhāḥ sarvathā sphaṭayantaḥ
iba jagati samastā nāma saṅkīrtanārtā
vayam api ca kṛtārḥāḥ kṛṣṇa-nāmāśrayāt

“When Lord Gauracandra, the most attractive personality within the three worlds, advented in this universe, many fallen souls began to wave their arms in the air, excited by the chanting of the holy names. We also were completely fulfilled because of our taking shelter of those same names of Kṛṣṇa. O my Lord!” (*Suśloka-śataka*, text 44, Sārvabhauma Bhaṭṭācārya)

When we finished our *kīrtana*, a roar of applause from the parade participants and the huge crowd in the square rose into the air. The medieval soldiers then blew on long trumpets as the crowd surged forward to see the mayor ascend the stage and take his seat. In Middle Ages' fashion, a town crier stepped up and eulogized the town's history, reading from a parchment. He spoke about the founding of the town, the members of the first town council, the construction of the town hall and first church, the battles fought, and other important events. When he spoke about the significance of today's festival, I thought he should have mentioned the most significant event of the day: how Lord Caitanya's *saṅkīrtana* party had inundated Człuchow with the holy names.

Groups of school children were then called forward to offer praise to the town and the mayor. Each group would sing, dance, or recite poetry before the stage, as the mayor, the city councilors and the citizens watched. We stood patiently for well over an hour until, to my surprise, an official called, “The Festival of India will now address the mayor!”

Thinking quickly, I assembled ten devotees. We walked onto the dais in front of the mayor and councilors. Within moments, Śrī Prahāda was leading a *kīrtana* while the devotees danced enthusiastically. I then had our two Indian dancers from South Africa perform a classical Kathak dance. The crowd roared with approval and the mayor smiled broadly. With the help of a translator, I then addressed the mayor and councilors through the public address system:

“Your Worship the Mayor, members of the town council, and respected citizens of Człuchow, it is with the greatest pleasure that we, members of the Festival of India, take part in the festivities honoring your great town. We are so happy to be able to share with you this culture of India, in particular the chanting of God’s holy name, which has given so much pleasure to the citizens of this town. We look forward to your participation in our part of the festivities tomorrow in the central park, where we will continue to share with you this colorful culture of singing, dancing, and feasting. We extend a special invitation to the Lord Mayor to dine with us in our vegetarian restaurant in the afternoon. May God bless your beautiful city. Hare Kṛṣṇa!”

With that, the town crier blew his trumpet, announcing that the parade had officially ended. As we turned to leave, people surrounded the devotees to ask questions. It took great effort to return to our bus.

The next day twenty thousand people attended our festival—a number of whom sang and danced with us late into the night. Perhaps historians will mark the day in the annals of Vaiṣṇava history. For me, that practically the entire town of Człuchow came and received Lord Caitanya’s mercy is a source of astonishment and wonder.

*gaurāṅgaḥ prema-mūrtir jagati yad avadbi prema -dānam karoti
pāpī tāpī surāpī nikhila-jana-dhanasyāpahāri kṛtagbnaḥ*

*sarvān dbarmān svakīyān viṣam iva viṣayam sampartiyajya kṛṣṇam
gāyanty-uccaiḥ pramattās tad avadhi vikalāḥ prema-sindhau vimagnāḥ*

“From the time that Śrī Gaurāṅga Mahāprabhu, the sacred form of love for Kṛṣṇa, gave out His gifts of love, the sinner, the ascetic, the drunkard, the dacoit, the rogue, and the thief, all very grateful to Him, completely abandoned their materialistic ways as if they were deadly poison, and then intoxicated, loudly sang the holy names of Kṛṣṇa until they sank exhausted into the ocean of *kṛṣṇa-prema*.” (*Suśloka-śataka*, text 49)

20

Festival in Kolobrzeg

June 28–July 3

As we drove north to the Baltic Sea coast, I was looking forward to the first festival of our summer tour. It was to be held in Kolobrzeg, a town with a population of 100,000. Last year’s festival there was the best of the tour and marked the first time the council had provided us with a prime location (next to the boardwalk on the beach). The festival included a Vedic marriage ceremony, which became the talk of the town.

This year would be different. Last year’s town council, including the mayor, had been voted out of office. When Nandinī and Rādhā-sakhī-vṛndā went to the town hall to apply for a permit from the new town council, they were refused. When they appealed, the council agreed to a proposal from our old opponent, the town architect, that anyone wanting to hold a festival on council property must pay three thousand dollars a day. According to one favorable council member, when the architect made his proposal, he slammed his fist on the table and said, “That will keep the Hare Kṛṣṇas out of Kolobrzeg.”

Nandinī and Rādhā-sakhī-vṛndā were undaunted. They began to inquire whether anyone would rent us private property. But no one was willing to risk renting land to us for fear of reprisal. Finally, a prominent businessman agreed to let us use his grass field located one kilometer from the beach. When Nandinī showed me the land, I wondered who would bother to wander that far off the boardwalk. “Don’t worry, Gurudeva,” Nandinī said, “we’ve been around town and many people are asking when our festival will begin. They’ll come here.”

I eventually agreed, but I kept thinking about the mayor and the council. If they had voted in our favor, we would have had a more ideal location. I thought, “If they could only see our festival, it would change their hearts.”

We opted for a three-day festival and performed *barināma* well in advance to advertise it. As it was unseasonably wet and cold, few people were on the streets, and we managed to distribute only a few thousand invitations. I began to wonder if we'd even be holding a festival. Sure enough, it rained the day we opened and attendance was low.

When I awoke the next morning I went to the window. The ominously dark clouds were discouraging. There was also a strong wind. I doubted our tents could handle it. My apprehensions were confirmed when we went to the site and found that many tents had blown over and been damaged. What a difference from last year's festival.

Suddenly Vara-nāyaka's cell phone rang. It was the businessman who had rented us the site. Vara-nāyaka's face lit up. "The businessman informs us that he is also putting on an event in the adjacent field today. He's hired a group of actors to demonstrate medieval sword fighting, and has had people all over town handing out invitations. He said a huge crowd will attend, and what's more, he's invited the mayor and a local Member of Parliament. He wants to know if he can bring them for lunch at our vegetarian restaurant!"

Sitting back and smiling broadly, I said, "Yes, of course, the mayor is welcome at our festival."

Despite the bad weather, thousands of people journeyed to those fields in the middle of nowhere. I'll never know if they came for the sword fighting or our festival, but we got the crowd I wanted. The greatest satisfaction came when Vara-nāyaka went to the medieval event just twenty meters away from our site and returned with the mayor and MP. When I saw them coming I leapt up and, to everyone's surprise, shouted, "Victory to Rāma!"

The mayor looked a little embarrassed as Vara-nāyaka showed him and the parliamentarian around the festival, but he soon relaxed and asked a variety of questions. The visitors were mesmerized by the *Rāmāyaṇa* production, and the mayor commented on the professionalism of the players. After touring the site for half an hour (they didn't have time for lunch after all), Vara-nāyaka brought them to the book tent, where I presented them both with *Bhagavad-gītās* and cookbooks. By then they were beaming with

appreciation. The mayor said, "I've heard a rumor you're coming back to Kolobrzeg in late July."

"Yes," I said, "that's our plan. You can see how many citizens love this festival."

Looking around, the mayor nodded and said, "Yes, they do. We'll be happy to see you in July."

As I was sitting there reflecting on the mayor's visit, a woman who was browsing through the books turned to me and said in fluent English, "This is a wonderful festival!"

"Oh, thank you. I'm pleased you like it."

"It's very much like India."

"Have you been there?"

"Yes, I lived there for eight years. I know it well, and I also know you people well!"

"How is that?"

Smiling, she explained that her husband was the Polish Consular General in Calcutta during the 1970s and '80s. The consulate was right next to our temple on Albert Road, and their quarters were across from our temple room. "We got used to the 4:30 A.M. services, and on a number of occasions we had the good fortune to see your spiritual master. You people were always so friendly, just like the Bengalis. In Mumbai people love you for your money, in Delhi for your position, but in Calcutta they love you for yourself. This festival is bringing back many wonderful memories."

As she turned to pay for a cookbook, I noticed a man at the book table looking at me intensely. Abruptly, he began to walk toward me. My bodyguard, Vaikuṅṭhapati dāsa, stepped forward to intercept him, but the man protested, saying, "Please, I want to meet that person. I've been waiting ten years to meet him. I don't mean any harm. It's important. I beg you, let me through."

I could see the man was harmless, so I told Vaikuṅṭhapati to let him approach. He said with respect, "Please, sir, may I have a few moments of your precious time?"

"Yes, of course. We can sit here and talk."

"Thank you," he said, and we sat down. "First, I want to show you

something.” He reached into his wallet, pulled out a folded piece of paper, and handed it to me. When I unfolded it I was surprised to see that it was an invitation to a festival we had held in Kolobrzeg in 1992. “I attended your lecture that night and it changed my life forever,” he said.

He looked down in embarrassment as he continued. “At that time I was a butcher by profession. God only knows how many animals I’ve slaughtered. Although your talk convinced me that it was wrong to kill animals, it was a struggle to give up my livelihood. Then one night I dreamed that all the animals I had killed were rushing at me, seeking revenge. I woke up screaming, and from that day on I gave up slaughtering and eating meat.

“Several years later my thirteen-year-old son died of leukemia. I felt the loss so keenly that I was ready to take my own life. Soon after, a friend of mine gave me a book you had written called *Vraja-līlā*. It was about one of your disciples who died of the same disease. That book gave me so much solace. It convinced me of the soul’s immortality and helped me deal with my son’s death. I can honestly say it saved my life.” He then took *Vraja-līlā* out of a plastic bag and said, “Please give this to someone else.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to keep it?” I asked.

“I know the book by heart. I’ve memorized every word.”

As he stood to go he added, “Before going, I would like to know if there are any instructions you can give me? Life has been so difficult at times and I know there are more problems ahead.”

“Yes,” I said. “I can share with you an instruction I received from my spiritual master that has saved me from unlimited suffering and given me the highest bliss: chant the Hare Kṛṣṇa mantra as given by Caitanya Mahāprabhu, the most recent incarnation of God.” Handing him a mantra card I continued, “Just as *Vraja-līlā dāsī* chanted and was delivered at death, so you will also be saved if you take shelter of these holy names.”

“Thank you,” he said. “I promise I’ll chant.”

With that, he turned and disappeared into the crowd.

*lokān samastān kali-durga-vāridher
nāmnā samuttārya svataḥ samarpitaṁ
śrī-gauracandrair-hari vaiṣṇavānām
nāmnāś ca tattvaṁ kathitam jane jane*

“Out of His spontaneous compassion Lord Caitanya restored all the people back to consciousness, and through the means of His holy name enabled them to pass beyond the impassable ocean of the age of quarrel. Thus by the golden moons of Lord Hari and the Vaiṣṇavas, the news of the names of Kṛṣṇa was told from person to person.” (*Suśloka-sātaka*, text 46)

21

If Mohammed Can't Go to the Mountain . . .

June 4–17

The pressure to find land along the Baltic coast increased when locals told us that the mayor of Swierzno would definitely not be reelected the following year. It was only through her influence that the school director had agreed to rent to us the facility this year. Also, we discovered that people are purchasing all available property because they expect land values to increase when Poland joins the EEC eighteen months from now.

But our busy festival schedule hardly allowed us time to search for property. We were holding a large festival every weekday except Mondays, and on the weekends. All 280 devotees rise at 5:00 A.M., and no one goes to bed before 11:00 P.M. The Polish tour is an intense but fully satisfying program. Thousands of people receive mercy every day. This program can only be compared to drinking hot sugarcane juice: it burns the lips, but it's too sweet to stop drinking it.

So we were having trouble finding land, but it is said, "If Mohammed can't go to the mountain, the mountain must go to Mohammed." By the Lord's grace, this proverb came true at our recent festival in Pobierowo.

While I was watching people take *prasādam* in the restaurant tent, I noticed a young girl carefully choosing a number of sweets and savories at the counter. The care with which she made her selections impressed me, so I approached her and said, "You seem familiar with the food."

"Yes," she replied, "I know exactly what I want."

"Have you eaten this food before?"

"Yes," she said, this was her sixth festival.

Surprised, I asked, "How old are you?"

"I'm ten. I've been coming to your festivals since I was four. Can you please serve me one of those *pakorās*?"

I served her and then left the tent to check on the festival. Thousands of

people were walking the festival grounds, and I could hardly make my way through the crowds to the book tent. When I arrived, I noticed a woman in her early twenties looking through *Bhagavad-gītā*. She was wearing a sari, but I didn't recognize her; I didn't think she was one of our tour devotees. Also, she had put on her sari in an unusual way, and she was wearing only a semblance of *tilaka* on her forehead—it was dark gray and oddly shaped. A number of devotees were staring at her, so I decided to speak to her. "Excuse me, are you visiting us from a particular temple?"

"No," she smiled, "I've never met devotees, although I've been longing to for years. Association with devotees is important. In *The Nectar of Devotion* association with devotees is listed as one of the five most important items of devotional service."

Amazed, I asked, "If this is the first time you've met devotees, how is it that you're dressed like this and quoting scripture?"

"I live in a small town in northeast Poland. I found out about Kṛṣṇa consciousness on the Internet five years ago. Soon after I made myself some *japa* beads and have been chanting every day. I also have an altar with Gaura-Nitāi Deities that I carved and to whom I offer my food. I came to Pobierowo with my parents on vacation and was delighted to see the devotees singing Hare Kṛṣṇa on the beach. I came to the festival today to find a spiritual master. May I ask you some questions about Kṛṣṇa consciousness?"

"Of course," I replied, and we talked for two hours. I then asked several of the devotee women to take care of her, including showing her how to properly wear a sari and *tilaka*. I walked back to the restaurant reflecting on how the Lord mercifully directs us back to the spiritual world.

Then a middle-aged woman approached me and said, "This is a great festival! You should come more often."

"I'm glad you appreciate it," I said. "By the way, you look wonderful in those *gopī* dots."

"I got them at the Indian makeup tent. I had to wait one hour, but it was worth it. I also enjoyed reading the displays on reincarnation and vegetarianism. After getting a bite to eat at the restaurant, I'm going to watch the theater."

“How did you learn about the festival?”

“My secretary told me,” she said, as we entered the restaurant tent and sat at a table together. “It would be wonderful if you would come back each year.”

“Actually, we would like to purchase land near here as a base for our festival tour and an eventual tourist attraction.”

“That’s a good idea,” she said. “I’ve heard the local people say how much they love you. You’ve been coming here for years with your festival programs. Are you having any luck finding property?”

“Not really,” I replied. “We’re so busy with these festivals that we don’t have time to look.”

“Well, maybe I can help you. Here’s my card. Come to my office on Monday and we can talk.”

With that, she got up and went to the front of the stage where the Rāmāyaṇa Theater was just beginning. I was in a hurry, so I stuffed her card into my *kurtā* pocket and left to check on the Indian dancers, who would be performing next.

As I ascended the stage, I saw the same woman sitting in the front row enjoying the theater. After the Indian dancers had performed, I gave my lecture and noticed that she was still sitting there. Out of curiosity I reached into my pocket and took out the card she had given me. I handed it to my translator and asked him to translate it for me. He read:

Mayor of Pobierowo
Head of Parent-Teacher Association
Director-in-charge of Regional Land Sales

I can only imagine what the large crowd of people must have thought of me as I stood there in front of them, my mouth hanging open and unable to speak. My only thought was, “My dear Lord, out of your kindness the mountain has come to us!”

*ananyāś cintayanto mām, ye janāḥ paryupāsate
teṣāṃ nityābhīyuktānām, yoga-kṣemaṃ vahāmy aham*

“But those who always worship Me with exclusive devotion, meditating on My transcendental form—to them I carry what they lack, and I preserve what they have.” (Bg. 9.22)

22

Woodstock

July 17–August 9

Despite the intensity of daily festivals and our beginning to look for land, it was time to prepare for the Woodstock Festival. We sent a crew a week early to the site in Zary, 550 km south of our festival location. Woodstock is the stuff preaching dreams are made of, a golden opportunity to present Kṛṣṇa consciousness in a huge way to thousands of people at once. It is organized by Jurek Owskiak, twice voted the most popular man in Poland. He hosts the two-day event to honor the young people who have helped him raise money for disabled children. Woodstock is a gala rock festival and the biggest annual musical event in Poland. Typically, 350,000 young people attend. The festival is set to the theme, “No Drugs, No Violence,” and to help project this image, Owskiak asks us to share our philosophy and lifestyle with the kids. We set up a village of tents with our displays of Vedic culture. Our stage show engages the kids day and night in a variety of devotional entertainment.

Our success at Woodstock is known throughout Poland. Such success intimidates the Catholic Church, which this year raised funds to have its own tent and programs at Woodstock. I welcomed the Church’s presence, knowing that “imitation is the highest form of flattery.”

Just before the rest of our tour devotees left for Woodstock, Kṛṣṇa sent us special mercy: Jurek and his wife paid us a surprise visit at our last festival in Kolobrzeg. Jurek’s wife had been on a two-week vacation in Kolobrzeg, and he had driven 500 km from Warsaw to collect her. They chanced upon our festival near the boardwalk, and fulfilled my long-cherished dream. Jurek had never seen our summer festivals, and his visit gave us the chance to show him what we do outside of Woodstock. As we escorted him around the festival site, he expressed his appreciation. Later, he and his wife enjoyed *prasādam* in a tent we quickly erected for them. We spent three hours discussing our activities and the forthcoming Woodstock event.

We have now packed up our summer festival and headed south. Tonight, I was sitting in the empty Woodstock site field watching the tent company erect our large tent (it takes them six days). Suddenly, a man on a bicycle rode up and shook my hand. He looked familiar, but I couldn't place him immediately. He identified himself as the chief of the fire department.

"The people of Zary have been waiting all year for you to come," he said. "They look forward to Kṛṣṇa's Village of Peace."

Then he smiled and said, "Do you remember last year when you visited our fire department and gave me a *Bhagavad-gītā*?"

"Yes, I remember."

"I've been reading it all year, almost every day. It became particularly relevant for me last month when one of my colleagues died fighting a house fire. From that book I understood that the soul is eternal."

Later in the evening, my driver, Rādhe-Śyāma, returned from Berlin, where he had been shopping for spices. When he arrived at the field, he jumped excitedly out of the van and said, "Gurudeva, when I was crossing the border from Germany into Poland, the border guards saw the big bags of spices I had purchased for the festival. One of them asked me why I had so many spices. I told them we were distributing food at Woodstock. He smiled and said, 'You aren't giving the food away, you charge. I ate at your village last year. The food was delicious!' Then they let me go without asking duty on the spices."

After ten days of preparation, we were ready for the great event. Our ranks had swelled to over 540 devotees, most coming from different European countries. Traditionally, our village and stage programs begin a day before Woodstock. Therefore, on August 1 at 12:00 P.M., we opened the village with a big *kīrtana* on stage and simultaneously began serving *prasādam* from the *prasādam* tent.

On stage, we had built a beautiful replica of an Indian temple, complete with arched lattice windows and spiraling domes. We then had a professional lighting company illuminate the scene. It looked as if you were walking into a fairy tale, and the stage soon became the talk of the festival.

We held continuous stage programs from noon until 2:00 A.M. the next day. The tent was packed throughout.

That afternoon we held an inaugural Ratha-yātrā festival on the Woodstock field. This meant having the London temple's Ratha-yātrā cart shipped over and assembled onsite. The Ratha-yātrā had been advertised as a major Woodstock event. Hundreds of people crowded around the cart as the Mayor of Zary and a local Member of Parliament (the former mayor) opened the chariot parade by giving speeches, cutting a ribbon before the cart, and breaking coconuts on the ground. More young people than devotees pulled the cart through the festival grounds. The parade continued for two hours under a light rain. Tens of thousands of kids watched in amazement. Because it was Woodstock, kids danced in the mud puddles as the cart passed—and the television crews caught it all. The procession was aired on the evening's national news. It was more than we had hoped for!

The three days went by swiftly, and most of the 350,000 people attending Woodstock passed through our village at one time or another. Upon visiting our village, some never left.

The day after Woodstock, we received a message that the mayor wanted to see us in his office at 3:00 P.M. Vara-nāyaka, Nandini, Rādhā-sakhī-vṛndā, and I arrived a few minutes early, and the mayor's secretary asked us to wait in the reception room. Suddenly, a television crew from TVN 24 (the Polish version of CNN) burst into the room. The woman interviewer apologized for being late.

"I'll say you're late," the secretary said. "You were supposed to be here an hour ago!"

A few seconds later, the mayor opened his door and saw two sets of visitors. Smiling, he said, "I'll see the Hare Kṛṣṇas first. They're more important."

He opened the door wider and we walked in. Closing it behind us he asked us to sit down. Two seconds later, the door flew open and the television crew entered, cameras at the ready. Turning on a big light, the interviewer said, "You don't mind if we film your meeting with the Hare Kṛṣṇas, do you? It will make a great story!"

Calmly the mayor said, “Not at all,” and he went on to glorify our participation at Woodstock. “The members of the Hare Kṛṣṇa movement have brought a wonderful culture to the Woodstock Festival,” he said. “We are proud to have had them in our town. They have an important message for our country’s young people. And just see how they are always happy!”

A few minutes later, the interviewer asked to speak to the mayor alone, and we left the room. Just as we were going out, she asked that we wait outside the building. She wanted to ask us more questions.

Then she came out with the cameraman. Setting up in front of the town hall, she told us we would be appearing on the national news. “Here’s your chance.” Standing under the Polish national flag, I spoke to the nation: “As members of the Hare Kṛṣṇa movement we are happy to be participants in this great Woodstock event. Jurek Owsiak invites us every year because we personify the two themes of his event: overcoming drug abuse and nonviolence. Our formula is simple: we simply chant God’s names—Hare Kṛṣṇa, Hare Kṛṣṇa, Kṛṣṇa Kṛṣṇa, Hare Hare/ Hare Rāma, Hare Rāma, Rāma Rāma, Hare Hare—and we distribute vegetarian food offered to God. These simple activities can purify anyone’s heart.”

To conclude, the interviewer asked, “How many plates of food did you actually distribute? Was it several thousand?”

Looking directly into the camera, I replied, “No, not several thousand. We distributed 92,463 plates. We cooked thirty-four tons of food!”

That afternoon as we were driving out of Zary to finish our summer tour on the Baltic, Śrī Prahlāda said, “Gurudeva, you must be satisfied. It was the biggest preaching ever for us at Woodstock.”

“Yes, it’s true. The only problem is that such preaching is addictive. I’m already thinking of next year’s Woodstock festival.”

Śrī Prahlāda laughed. “For now you’ll have to be content with another two weeks of festivals along the coast. Don’t forget, they’re also blissful.”

“Yes, I know. Mahāprabhu’s mercy is flooding this land from all directions.”

*antar-dhvānta-cayam samasta-jagatām unmūlayanti haṭhāt
premānanda-rasāmbudhim niravadhi-prodevalayanti balāt*

*viśvam śītalayanty ativa vikalam tāpa-trayeṇānīsam
yusmākam hṛdaye cakāstu satatam caitanyacandra-cchaṭā*

“Uprooting the dense darkness in the hearts of the entire world, making the nectar ocean of the bliss of pure love of Kṛṣṇa overflow its shores without limit, and cooling this universe tormented by the threefold miseries, may the splendid moonlight of the moon of Lord Caitanyacandra eternally shine within your hearts.” (*Śrī Caitanya-candrāmṛta*, Chapter 3, text 17)

23

Polish Tour Ends But Preaching Continues

August 9–September 21

After the Woodstock Festival, we returned to the Baltic Sea coast and concluded the summer with eight more highly successful festivals in small towns and villages. To the very end I awaited the fulfillment of the astrologers' predictions, but I didn't experience a single act of aggression or violence. What happened to the forces that were supposed to bring us down? We experienced only one victory after another as day after day, thousands of people poured into our festivals, and we distributed thousands of books and hundreds of thousands of plates of *prasādam*. Were the astrologers wrong? Was I to conclude, as some have, that their profession is no longer valid in Kali-yuga? No, they have often given me good advice. The answer may relate to the guardian angels who follow us:

*bbūtāni viṣṇoḥ sura-pūjitāni, durdarśa-liṅgāni ādbbutāni
rakṣanti tad-bhaktimataḥ parebhyo, mattaś ca martyān attha sarvataś ca*

“The order carriers of Lord Viṣṇu, who are worshiped even by the demigods, possess wonderful bodily features exactly like those of Viṣṇu and are very rarely seen. The Viṣṇudūtas protect the devotees of the Lord from the hands of enemies, from envious persons and even from my jurisdiction, as well as from natural disturbances.” (Yamarāja to the Yamadūtas, *Bhāg.* 6.3.18)

Our tour officially ended on August 23. Who can describe our feelings of separation as we said goodbye to our comrades in arms? Soldiers in Lord Caitanya's army, we had preached together vigorously for months, giving every ounce of our energy to using the holy name to melt the hearts

of disenchanted souls. Such intense service, often lasting eighteen hours a day, allowed us to forge close friendships. By daily witnessing the miracle of Lord Caitanya's mercy, our faith in the power of the holy names had grown strong. We believed in Prabhupāda's instructions and in each other. I watched grown men cry and women fall into each other's arms as the three buses carrying the main group of devotees drove away in different directions. After they were gone, I remained behind at the base to attend to a few last-minute details. Actually, I spent most of my time in my room, lamenting that for now, the great *yajña* was over.

"When golden Lord Hari appeared in this world, His glory flooded the world with the nectar of pure love of Kṛṣṇa and there was tumultuous chanting of the holy names of Lord Hari. Oh, will that sweet time ever come again?" (*Caitanya-candrāmṛta*, Chapter 12, text 32)

But I pulled myself together within a few days, and along with Śrī Prahāda, Rukmiṇī-priyā dāsī, and several other devotees, drove the eighteen hours to Hungary to attend Janmāṣṭamī at New Vraja-dhāma. It was a sweet, well-organized festival, with plenty of *kīrtana* and *prasādam*. Such festivals are essential to maintain the devotees' enthusiasm, and no doubt the five hundred devotees who attended gained the spiritual strength to return to their various devotional service duties.

Still, my mind continued to wander back to the Polish seaside and our festivals, where we had provided many conditioned souls with their first encounter with the Lord after millions of lives of forgetfulness. I live only for such moments when crowds of people, dressed in their best clothes, stream into our festival grounds, their eyes alight when they see the event before them. At New Vraja-dhāma, I missed those fallen souls with the same intense feelings of separation I felt toward the tour devotees. O Lord Caitanya, please allow me to always dance in your eternal festival of the holy names!

After a week at New Vraja-dhāma, I headed east toward Ukraine and yet another devotee festival at Odessa. Two thousand devotees descended on the shores of the Black Sea for days of chanting, dancing, and feasting. For a week I was drowned in the affection of loving disciples, friends, and

well-wishers, most notably my dearest and closest friend, Bhakti-bhṛṅga Govinda Mahārāja. It had been two long years since we had been together, and our warm embrace upon seeing one another confirmed our affection. Who failed to note the appreciation we showed one another as we shared our victories and defeats while pushing on our spiritual master's mission? How could the so-called love in this material world compare with the friendship we exchanged while reminiscing about the devotional service we have performed together through the years? One night as Nirañjana Mahārāja led *kīrtana*, I saw a tear in Bhakti-bhṛṅga Govinda Mahārāja's eye. I could see he was appreciating Mahārāja's sweet singing. I felt fortunate to have him as my friend.

“By remembering Lord Hari, the devotees' hearts become overwhelmed with bliss, their bodily hairs stand erect, and their eyes become filled with tears of joy. O earth, these devotees are the best of men. Please carefully maintain them for as long as the sun and the moon shine in the sky. What is the use of your carefully maintaining those other burdensome persons who are simply intent on coming and going to and from the house of Yamarāja?” (*Padyāvahī*, text 55)

From Ukraine I flew to Kazakhstan and Bhakti-bhṛṅga Govinda Mahārāja's community, Śrī Vṛndāvana-dhāma, located on the outskirts of Almaty at the base of the Himalayas. No doubt for performing this service, Mahārāja already has his service awaiting him in the realm of liberated souls. This preaching is so difficult. He raised this community from the desert of a strictly Muslim country, a country bordered by Russia, China, Uzbekistan, and Kirgistan. Mahārāja came here five years ago and began attracting souls with his powerful *kīrtanas* and enchanting lectures. At the time there were only a few devotees and a small temple. As I stepped out of the car upon my arrival, I was greeted by hundreds of devotees, their slightly Oriental eyes shining in the midst of a loud *kīrtana*. I had briefly visited Kazakhstan two years ago, so I could appreciate the progress this community has made. Instead of a small temple, the devotees here now have a house expanded to accommodate a large temple room, large gardens with beautiful pathways, a number of new houses for the devotees, and most notably a large paint-

ed sign with designs for a Vedic temple, *gōśālā*, residences, and shops. As we stopped to admire the plans, I asked Mahārāja where he would get the capital for such an ambitious project. Looking up at the sky he replied, “I have no idea, but He knows. It will manifest in due course of time.”

Over the next week we held a festival Bhakti-bhṛṅga Govinda Mahārāja style: three hours of *kīrtana* in the morning, seminars throughout the day, and four hours of *kīrtana* at night, all held in a large *paṇḍāl*.

Soon it will be time to turn my attention from blissful festivals to purifying *bhajana* in holy Vṛndāvana. I leave from this *dhāma* to that *dhāma* next week. There, at the base of Govardhana Hill, at Bhaktivedanta Ashram, I will try to recuperate my strength after a busy year of preaching, and attempt to delve into the Vraja’s glories so that I can purify myself for next year’s challenges.

“Meditating on the lotus feet of Śrī Śrī Rādhā-Muralī-Manohara, placing myself in the dust of Lord Caitanya’s feet, and respectfully offering obeisances to the great devotees of the Lord, who are so many oceans of transcendental virtue, I shall now happily begin to praise the transcendental opulences of Śrī Vṛndāvana.” (*Vṛndāvana-mahimāmṛta*, Śataka 1, text 1)

24

Kazakhstan–Katmandu–Delhi

September 22–October 16

While I was in Kazakhstan, I wrote several devotees about the possibility of visiting Nepal before going to Vṛndāvana. Together we made plans to trek to the Kali Gaṇḍakī River in the Himalayas to search for sacred *śalagrāma-śilās*. The great Vaiṣṇava saint, Gopāla Bhaṭṭa Gosvāmī, walked to the Kali Gaṇḍakī five hundred years ago after receiving Caitanya Mahāprabhu’s order to look for *śalagrāma-śilās*. I have made the three-week journey from Katmandu before and found it invigorating. The exotic nature of Nepal is also fascinating.

We had already purchased our tickets to Katmandu when I read an American government announcement warning its citizens of the travel risks in Nepal. The notice said that while Maoist insurgents are losing support for their guerrilla warfare against the Nepalese authorities, the situation remains dangerous for Americans:

This public announcement is being issued to alert American citizens that Maoists appear to be initiating a campaign of violence in Nepal in anticipation of a nationwide strike. There is a possibility of heightened risks to American citizens and American interests in Nepal, especially outside the Katmandu Valley, from Maoist insurgency.

Popular support for the Maoists has been waning and they have resorted to increasingly brutal acts of intimidation to enforce compliance. Government vehicles and public conveyances have been attacked with explosive devices, and as such American citizens are urged to evaluate carefully the movement of traffic on streets before undertaking travel and in general to maintain a low profile.

Reports of threats against and robberies of American trekkers, property destruction suffered by American businesses, and anti-American rhetoric by the Maoist leadership indicate continuing risk to Americans in Nepal.

I sent the notice on to the other devotees as well as read several newspaper accounts of the conflict. We decided to cancel our trip. However, when I discovered that the airline would not reimburse me but that I could change my return date to Delhi, I decided to go to Katmandu for two days to visit my godbrother, Bimala Prasāda dāsa, who was there to renew his Indian visa.

After Tamāl Krishna Mahārāja's departure six months ago, I had resolved that I would attempt to associate with as many godbrothers as possible this year. The trip to Nepal seemed a good opportunity and a safe choice, because the U.S. government notice had stated that the violence was taking place mainly outside the Katmandu Valley. I contacted a reputable travel agent in Katmandu, and they told me that since the notice had been issued, things had quieted down and some foreigners had even resumed their trekking. I left Delhi with a few extra supplies, still entertaining the possibility of going to the Kali Gaṇḍakī with Bimala Prasāda.

That prospect faded, however, when I boarded the flight from Delhi to Katmandu and discovered that the flight was only half full. There were no Western tourists on the plane. Upon arrival in Katmandu, I passed through Immigration and Customs quickly and met Bimala Prasāda outside the terminal. After we had embraced and offered obeisances, I mentioned the prospect of hiking to the Kali Gaṇḍakī. Bimala Prasāda sobered. He said, "Mahārāja, today I met an Australian girl who wanted to hike the same route we were planning to use. She was looking for a taxi in a remote region to take her to the point of departure, four hours out of Pokhara, when a car stopped and the driver asked if she wanted a lift. She refused his offer and he left. Just thirty meters down the road, a hand grenade was thrown through the passenger window of the car. The explosion destroyed the vehicle and the driver was killed."

"Well, that erases any last hope I have of making the trek this trip," I replied.

Bimala said, “Besides, the guerrillas are still robbing unsuspecting trekkers and shooting anyone walking in the riverbeds [where the *śilās* are found] in case they are government agents.”

“Okay, Bimala, Katmandu sounds like a great place to spend the next two days!”

Bimala Prasāda and I spent the day together reading, chanting, and reminiscing about the devotional service we performed in South Africa together years ago. The next day, before catching my flight back to Delhi, we went to see Paśupati, a Śiva temple on the outskirts of Katmandu. We also visited the home of a Nepalese man we had met on a previous visit to Paśupati. Visiting him made my trip to Katmandu even more worthwhile, because he presented me with a beautiful silver necklace with fifty-four small, round *śilās* strung on it as a gift. What a rare gift—something I’ll treasure for a lifetime.

On the flight back to Delhi, I was pleasantly surprised to be given a seat in business class. An elderly woman sat next to me, and she began to speak to me the moment the plane took off.

“Are you a yogi?” she asked.

“Well, yes,” I replied. “I practice *bhakti-yoga*, the form of yoga that concentrates on awakening love of God.”

“That’s interesting,” she said. “Do you live in Nepal?”

“No.”

“Where do you live?” she inquired further.

I thought for a moment, then said with a laugh, “Actually, I don’t live anywhere! I have no home.”

“You have no home? What about your family?”

Rather than risk drifting into the mundane, I decided to see if she had any interest in spiritual life. I quoted the first Sanskrit verse I ever saw, a verse written and left in my apartment by Viṣṇujana Mahārāja as he went on his way after visiting my former wife and me just before we joined ISKCON. The verse had a powerful effect on me at the time, and in many ways has directed my life:

*naikatra priya-saṁvāsaḥ, subhṛdāṁ citra-karmaṇām
oghena vyūhyamānānām, plavānām srotaso yathā*

“Many planks and sticks, unable to stay together, are carried away by the force of a river’s waves. Similarly, although we are intimately related with friends and family members, we are unable to stay together because of our varied past deeds and the waves of time.” (*Bhāg.* 10.5.25)

I waited for her reply, hoping our conversation would lean in a spiritual direction. She said, “I understand what you mean. I’m seventy-two and I’m the only member of my family left.”

“Do you live in Nepal?”

She surprised me when she said, “No, I’m from Columbia, but I don’t have a home either. I’ve spent the last ten years traveling. I’m searching for something . . .” she paused, then added, “but I’m not sure what.”

There was my cue, and I began to explain the basic philosophy of Kṛṣṇa consciousness. In fact, because she was listening so intently, I spoke for almost the entire hour-and-a-half flight. When the plane landed, she put her hand on my arm and said, “May I keep in touch with you?”

“Yes, of course,” I said, “but if neither of us has a home, how will we keep in contact?”

“Through the Internet, of course! I may be old, but I’m not out of touch!”

We exchanged e-mail addresses and parted, but met again in line at Customs.

“Do you travel much?” she asked.

Chuckling and wanting to impress her, I showed her my passport full of stamps from around the world.

“He who laughs first, laughs last,” she said. “Just look at this!” And she showed me her passport, which was twice as thick as mine and also filled with immigration stamps.

Joking, I said, “Oh, but it’s easy for you—you probably always travel business class!”

“Oh, no. In the past year alone I crisscrossed America four times in a Greyhound bus, hitchhiked the length and breadth of Australia, took a train from Moscow to Beijing, drove a car from the north to the south of India and back, and just finished hiking the mountains north of Katmandu. I saw

plenty of those rebels, too!”

I stood dumbfounded as she cleared Customs. Turning around, she left with a smile and a few words of comfort: “I think I have finally found what I was searching for. Your words were inspiring. I’ll be in touch.”

Outside I hailed a taxi and headed for Vṛndāvana. Speeding through the countryside in the early morning hours, I held close to my heart the two precious things I had obtained in Nepal: the priceless necklace of *śalagrāma-śilās* and the opportunity to help a conditioned soul begin her path back to the spiritual world.

*bhavāpavargo bbramato yadā bhavej
janasya tarby acyuta sat-samāgamah
sat-saṅgamo yarbi tadaiva sad-gatau
parāvareśe tvayi jāyate matiḥ*

“When the material life of a wandering soul has ceased, O Acyuta, he may attain the association of Your devotees. And when he associates with them, there awakens in him devotion unto You, who are the goal of the devotees and the Lord of all causes and their effects.” (*Bhāg.* 10.51.53)

25

Śrīla Prabhupāda’s Mercy

October 17–November 20

While wearing the loincloth and torn quilt of a renunciant, maintaining my life with fruits that have fallen from the trees, discussing transcendental topics, not wasting time in any manner, giving up all kinds of false ego, and begging alms door to door, I will constantly reside in the forest of Vṛndādevī, following in the footsteps of those who are completely surrendered to Śrī Rādhikā.” (*Śrī Vṛndāvana-mahimāmr̥ta*, Śataka 1, text 64)

While on the road from Delhi to Vṛndāvana, I decided to write a mission statement about how I would conduct myself in the *dhāma* and what I hoped to achieve during my two-month stay. I had already experienced that unless I am focused on spiritual activities there, my precious time in holy places can be whittled down to nothing—lost to socializing and simply caring for bodily needs. I searched the scripture and found a verse that seemed appropriate for one in the renounced order who is living in the *dhāma*:

*grāmya-kathā nā śunibe, grāmya-vārtā nā kabibe
bhāla nā khāibe āra bhāla nā paribe
amāni mānada hañā kṛṣṇa-nāma sadā la’be
vraje rādhā-kṛṣṇa-sevā mānase karibe*

“Do not talk like people in general or hear what they say. You should not eat very palatable food, nor should you dress very nicely. Do not expect honor, but offer all respect to others. Always chant the holy name of Kṛṣṇa, and within your mind render service to Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa in Vṛndāvana.” (Cc. *Antya* 6.236–7)

Upon arriving at ISKCON’s Bhaktivedanta Ashram, just meters from sacred Govardhana Hill, I settled into my simple quarters and planned how

to apply my mission statement. Not hearing what people in general had to say seemed easy, for there are no newspapers or magazines at Govardhana. Despite the fact that nearby Vṛndāvana has grown immensely during the past few years and is now a popular destination for truth-seekers and tourists alike, the area around Govardhana Hill has remained much as it has been for centuries, simple and rural. Besides, any newspapers that find their way to the area would be written in Hindi, saving me from temptation.

As far as eating, I had decided to eat only *kitchari* and *caṇḍīs* during Kārttika. That would also not be so difficult, as I prefer a simple diet. Because I would not be preaching in public, I had decided to alternate between two sets of old cloth. This would allow me to blend in easily with the local *sādbus*. As for honor, I was fortunate to find myself in the association of advanced godbrothers who were spending their time hearing and chanting at Govardhana—godbrothers such as Jayādvaīta Mahārāja, Vaiṣeṣika Prabhu, Gopī-paraṇadhana Prabhu, and Keśava Bhārati Prabhu. If I were to earn their respect, I would have to rise to their level of realization and service, something that would take more than two months of self-purification.

The most difficult part of my mission statement to fulfill would be to constantly chant the holy names and render service to Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa within my mind. Chanting rounds beyond my basic sixteen requires determination and practice as well as a genuinely higher taste. Rendering service to Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa within my mind would mean nothing less than bona fide spiritual advancement. Both of these activities become possible only after great effort and perseverance.

*pramāṇais tat-sad-ācārais,
tad-abyāsair nirantaram
bodhayan ātmanātmānam,
bhaktim apy uttamām labhet*

“The highest devotion is attained by slow degrees by the method of constant endeavor for self-realization with the help of scriptural evidence, theistic conduct and perseverance in practice.” (*Śrī Brahma-sambitā*, 59)

I came to Govardhana to pursue these goals. I am not on vacation. I came to perform whatever austerities are necessary to purify my heart so that I can enter a deeper understanding of Kṛṣṇa consciousness and then return to the West to share my newfound realizations with others.

When planning this trip, I had decided to bring only one servant with me, Rādhe-Śyāma dāsa, to help with cooking and cleaning. More devotees than that would distract me from my singular purpose to focus on *bhajana*.

But Giri-Govardhana had other plans. Just two days after I began my routine of chanting extra rounds, reading, and eating only once a day, I received an unexpected e-mail from a very old friend: “Coming to India in two weeks. Looking forward to seeing you soon! Your friend, Craig.”

Craig Scott and I were acquainted in high school but became close friends during our first year of college. We lived in a rented house near the campus along with a few other boys and did all the wrong things together—activities that were typical of the hippy youth of the late '60s. All of us boys held Craig in high esteem, though, because he went beyond experimenting with mind-enhancing drugs to find spiritual truth. Indeed, he was an avid reader of spiritual books and often frequented lectures by various yogis and gurus.

When I moved from San Francisco in 1969, I lost touch with Craig briefly, but then I received a letter from him in which he said he had been meditating in a yoga *āśrama* when someone announced that a spiritual parade was about to start at Golden Gate Park. The announcement said that three large chariots would be the centerpieces of the occasion, and anyone who manned the pulling ropes would be granted liberation from the material world. Craig said he left the *āśrama* immediately and ran to the park, where he found the parade just beginning. He grabbed the ropes of one of the carts and pulled for as long and hard as he could, convinced that he must have achieved liberation. But the real treat came at the conclusion of the event, when he heard the group’s spiritual master speak from the largest of the chariots. Craig wrote me at that time: “I could tell he was a fully enlightened soul, and I honestly feel this is the path that you should follow. It’s called the Hare Kṛṣṇa movement.”

At the time I knew nothing of the Hare Kṛṣṇa movement, and his pre-

diction meant nothing to me. Little did I know that in the not-so-distant future, one of my services to that “fully enlightened soul,” Śrīla Prabhupāda, would be to organize Ratha-yātrā festivals around the world.

That letter was the last I ever heard from Craig until just nine months ago when I came across his e-mail address on our high school website. I wrote to him, and he immediately replied. We met on my visit to the United States last spring, during which I casually invited him to come to India. His e-mail to me in my *bhajana-kuṭir* at Govardhana confirming his arrival came as a surprise.

I have been at Govardhana for two weeks. Today I took a taxi to the Delhi airport to meet Craig’s incoming flight. I had no idea what to expect. Would Craig, who had never been to India, adjust to the climate and exotic cuisine? More importantly, how would he fit into my strict *bhajana* schedule? Only after many years of active devotional service had I finally developed a desire to sit and chant in a solitary place for purification—and it was still only a desire! I had yet to prove to myself that I could actually do it. But all doubts were dissipated when I saw Craig. He had a bead bag hanging from his neck and *Bhagavad-gītā* in his hand.

He said, “Before coming, I visited the local Hare Kṛṣṇa temple in San Diego to learn more about your faith. I guess they thought my inquiry sincere enough to give me these beads and to teach me how to chant. I love chanting!”

“And the book?” I was still amazed at his devotional appearance.

“Well, that’s another story. As I was on my way through the terminal at the Los Angeles airport, a devotee approached me with the book. He asked where I was going. Boy, was he surprised when I told him I was going to a place called Vṛndāvana to be with an old friend named Indradyumna Swami! In fact, he was so shocked he gave me the book!”

Craig took to Vṛndāvana like a duck to water. In particular, he fell in love with what he called the “living mountain,” Giri-Govardhana. The scriptures say that five thousand years ago, out of His causeless mercy, Lord Kṛṣṇa assumed the form of Govardhana Hill to accept His devotees’ worship. “I have no problem accepting that the mountain is a manifestation of

God,” Craig said to me one morning, “if only because there are so many holy men bowing down to Him with such sincerity. Who am I to doubt such great souls?”

By the end of the second day at Govardhana, I saw Craig often offering *daṇḍavats* to Govardhana Hill. “Are you also praying?” I asked him.

“Yes, I’m praying that I can become a lover of God. I always wanted to focus on God, but never knew how. Here, God is manifest before my eyes. Also, unlike other temples I’ve attended, the curtain never closes!”

Soon Craig was following the same program I was following. We rose together at 2:30 A.M. to chant, read *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam*, and later relish morning *prasādam*. “I love this thick soup [*kitchari*],” Craig said often.

One of his favorite activities was doing *parikrama* around Govardhana, although neither of us could complete the full twenty-two kilometers. One morning, when we were halfway around the hill, he said, “We have to try. We’re getting older and we have so little time left to succeed.” Seeing his spiritual urgency gave me faith that Girirāja was bestowing His mercy on him.

But his most satisfying comment came while we were walking to the Krishna-Balaram Mandir for Prabhupāda’s disappearance day festival. As we approached and saw the big *paṇḍāl* and the thousands of devotees awaiting the ceremony, Craig turned and said, “I feel fortunate to be here. I think it’s because I saw and heard Śrīla Prabhupāda speak at that Ratha-yātrā festival thirty-three years ago. It’s by his mercy that I am here. I wonder why it took me so long to come?” I didn’t answer, but remembered Śrīla Prabhupāda’s saying, “The best will come last.”

When it was my turn to speak at the festival, I came before Prabhupāda’s *mūrti* and offered obeisances. As I rose and prepared to read my offering, I noticed Craig sitting nearby, chanting softly on his beads. From the corner of my eye I saw him listening appreciatively as I read. It seemed natural, for we were both indebted to Prabhupāda for the same reasons: he had delivered us from material existence and revealed to us the glories of Śrī Vṛndāvana-dhāma, the spiritual world. Therefore as I read, I felt I was speaking for both of us. It didn’t matter that I came first and had spent more time practicing Kṛṣṇa consciousness. By Prabhupāda’s mercy, the eternal

seed of Kṛṣṇa consciousness can sprout in anyone's heart and blossom fully at any time.

Dearest Śrīla Prabhupāda,

Please accept my most humble obeisances in the dust of your lotus feet. All glories to you! Today in this sacred abode of Vṛndāvana-dhāma, we are observing the twenty-fifth anniversary of your departure. In this world, love tends to fade after a long period of separation, but the opposite seems true in transcendental relationships, because since your departure your followers' attachment for you has simply grown. The answer to this apparent contradiction is given in your conclusion to *Caitanya-caritāmṛta*. Referring to your own spiritual master you write: "He lives forever by his divine instructions—and the follower lives with him."

This is the miracle of Kṛṣṇa consciousness, Śrīla Prabhupāda: for those who follow your instructions, death itself cannot restrict them from your association.

Śrīla Prabhupāda, I have been following your instructions carefully ever since I met you through the transcendental medium of your disciples. It was Viṣṇujana Mahārāja who introduced me to you, saying, "Come here, young man, and I will tell you the glories of my spiritual master!" His dedication and love for you was infectious, and within moments he accomplished what could have taken lifetimes. Almost effortlessly I gave up my sinful ways and became your humble servant. It was only one of the many miracles you have shown the world, Śrīla Prabhupāda, that I, a lost soul, could become a devotee aspiring to go back to Godhead in this lifetime.

Śrīla Prabhupāda, it was your instructions that attracted me to your lotus feet, your instructions that kept me close to you when you were present, and your instructions that have maintained and nurtured our relationship since your departure. I have faith that by continuing to follow those instructions, I will one day again have your divine association.

Śrīla Prabhupāda, someone might think I deserve such mer-

cy because the little service I have rendered has somehow earned me recognition, but this is certainly *māyā*'s joke. I am a bumbling, stumbling fool, maintaining my material desires, slow in taking up devotional service in earnest, quick to revert to past bad habits, and always struggling with the mind and senses. What hope is there for such a foolish pretender?

The answer lies in trying to fulfill your most cherished desire. I cannot claim to know the innermost recesses of your heart, Śrīla Prabhupāda, where pure love for Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa gushes like a beautiful mountain spring. But I do know of one special desire in your heart—a desire you shared openly with us and often expressed in your books: “The duty of all devotees is to preach Kṛṣṇa consciousness everywhere in the world, because all living entities are suffering the pangs of material existence. To preach Kṛṣṇa consciousness is the best welfare activity. Indeed it is described by Śrī Caitanya Mahāprabhu as *para-upakāra*, work for the true benefit of others.” (*Bhāg.* 7.7.53, purport)

The task of delivering conditioned souls suffering in this world was your foremost desire while among us, Śrīla Prabhupāda. I have spent the better part of my life trying to help you fulfill that desire, and on this auspicious day I want to dedicate the remaining years of my life to that same mission. One could easily say it's more appropriate to retire at this time, because such service has already brought me to my knees. My aging body has grown weary through years of organizing public festivals, performing thousands of hours of street *saṅkīrtana*, and traveling hundreds of thousands of miles to preach around the world. But how can I stop? The service I have rendered falls short of the debt I owe you for the priceless gift of Kṛṣṇa consciousness you have given me.

*evam janam nipatitam prabhavābi-kūpe
kāmābhikāmam anu yaṁ prapātan prasāṅgāt
kṛtvātmasāt surarṣiṇā bhagavan grhītaḥ
so 'ham katham nu viṣṭe tava bhṛtya-sevām*

“My dear Lord, O Supreme Personality of Godhead, because of my association with material desires, one after another, I was gradually falling into a blind well full of snakes, following the general populace. But Your servant Nārada Muni kindly accepted me as his disciple and instructed me how to achieve this transcendental position. Therefore, my first duty is to serve him. How could I leave his service?” (*Bhāg.* 7.9.28)

Besides, preaching your message is like drinking hot sugarcane juice: although it burns the lips, it is too sweet to stop. The sweetness is in seeing the devotional transformations in the hearts of people big and small who receive your mercy. By your desire alone, such miracles take place on a daily basis throughout the world. I see them continuously, day after day, month after month, year after year.

Once, after a huge festival in Durban, our guest of honor, South African President Nelson Mandela, put his hand on mine and with tears in his eyes said, “Mahārāja, this is the greatest day of my life!” Just last year, again near Durban, when a group of devotees and I were passing through a tribal village in Kwazulu Natal, thousands of children began chanting, “Zulu, Zulu, Zulu,” covered by bodily consciousness. When I picked up the *mṛdaṅga* and began to sing the *mahā-mantra*, however, all of them began to chant Hare Kṛṣṇa and dance with me. What is this great miracle of the holy names you have given that makes the whole world dance in ecstasy?

On another occasion, Somaka dāsa told me of the trip he took along the Amazon River ten years after I had visited the region. During his journey, he saw a twenty-year-old man in a remote village, who, to his astonishment, was chanting *japa* under a tree. When Somaka inquired how he had come in touch with the *mahā-mantra*, he said he had received it and the *japa* beads from me during my Amazon sojourn. He said the chanting had changed his life for the better, so every day he came to sit on the riverbank, wait-

ing for me to return. Śrīla Prabhupāda, your mercy has inundated even the most remote corners of the earth!

Then, miracle of miracles, I have seen a crowd of 350,000 young people at Woodstock in Poland enthusiastically chanting the *mahā-mantra* as Śrī Prahlāda and his band played on the main stage. No doubt the tumultuous sound created by the crowd's chanting and the huge cloud of dust raised by their dancing inundated Svargaloka, causing the demigods to stand motionless in astonishment at your glorious accomplishments.

Certainly there are many more miracles to be witnessed by those who give their lives to your *saṅkīrtana* mission, Śrīla Prabhupāda. Please include me in whatever plans you have for preaching from this day forth. Having tasted the nectar of spreading the glories of the holy name, I can never return to the burnt remnants of the material world's so-called pleasures.

As far as my retirement is concerned, I pray to follow in your footsteps, my glorious master. May I retire from preaching only when I have breathed the last breath allocated to this body. If it pleases you, let that be only a temporary respite, for I am prepared to serve your *saṅkīrtana* movement birth after birth.

Your eternal servant,
Indradyumna Swami

26

Let the Calamaties Come Again and Again

November 21–December 6

As the auspicious month of Kārttika drew to a close, Craig asked if there were other holy places in India we could visit. I told him there were countless holy places, but that Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavas generally congregate at only three: Vṛndāvana, Māyāpur, and Jagannātha Purī. These *tīrthas* are particularly dear to the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavas because the Supreme Lord performed His transcendental pastimes in each of them during different ages.

Then Craig asked about Ahovalam, the place where Lord Nṛsiṃhadeva appeared. Craig had taken a liking to Lord Nṛsiṃhadeva, and had been avidly reading the *Bhāgavatam*'s Seventh Canto. He had even bought a large silver ring of Lord Nṛsiṃhadeva in Loi Bazaar.

“Ahovalam is in South India,” I explained. “We may not have time to go there this trip. I suggest we go to Jagannātha Purī for a few days and then to Māyāpur.”

Craig approved of the idea, and the morning after Kārttika ended we packed our bags. We were both planning to return to Vṛndāvana, so we left behind all nonessentials. We were traveling in a group of six devotees, and together we set out for the Delhi airport to catch our flight to Bhubaneswar. While we were driving in the taxi, I saw Craig looking intensely at his Nṛsiṃhadeva ring. “I’ll never leave this behind,” he said. “It will go with me everywhere.” It made me happy to see Craig’s faith in Lord Nṛsiṃhadeva blossom, and I said, “No doubt the Lord is present in that ring. Every day in the ISKCON temples we chant a prayer to Lord Nṛsiṃhadeva, part of which is *ito nṛsiṃhaḥ parato nṛsiṃho, yato yato yāmi tato nṛsiṃhaḥ*.”

“What does it mean?” Craig asked.

“It means that Lord Nṛsiṃhadeva is all-pervading. He is situated both within and without everything. He manifests to protect His devotees. The

Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam explains that in this material world, there is danger at every step.”

“Yes,” said Craig, “that’s why I’m wearing His ring.”

Our flight arrived in Bhubaneshwar early that afternoon. Vṛndāvana had been getting cooler by the day, so Orissa’s tropical breeze was pleasing. The pace of life seemed slower too, although that’s probably because Kārtika in Vṛndāvana is so hectic.

We hired two taxis at the airport and embarked on the scenic fifty-kilometer drive to Purī. Dharmātma Prabhu, Craig, and I shared one car, while Rādhe-Śyāma dāsa and two other devotees traveled in another vehicle. The land was lush; palm trees swayed in the light wind. Crystal clear lakes and ponds dotted the landscape.

As our taxi sped through the countryside, I thought again about Craig’s attraction to Lord Nṛsiṃhadeva. He had only recently become seriously interested in Kṛṣṇa consciousness, but like many devotees, he had quickly become attracted to this particular form of the Lord. It reminded me of Śrīla Prabhupāda’s purport to *Bhāgavatam* 7.5.23–24 in which he explains how devotees have such attractions: “The transcendental holy name of the Lord may be heard and chanted accordingly to the attraction of the devotee. One may chant the holy name of Lord Kṛṣṇa, or one may chant the holy name of Lord Rāma or Nṛsiṃhadeva. The Lord has innumerable forms and names, and devotees may meditate upon a particular form and chant the holy name according to his attraction.”

Then suddenly, the idyllic atmosphere was shattered. Dharmātma Prabhu was screaming, “Watch out!” I looked out the front window and saw a motorcycle hurtling toward us. The rider, adjusting something on the machine, was unaware that he had crossed into our lane. Instinctively I began to chant Hare Kṛṣṇa at the top of my lungs. I saw an expression of horror come over the man’s face as he looked up at the last moment before crashing into our car.

I closed my eyes and cringed at the sound of crunching metal and shattering glass. Bracing myself for the rider’s body—or motorcycle—to come crashing through the windshield as often happens in high-speed accidents, I held tightly to the seat. Would our car swerve into the ditch? But I was as-

tonished to see that our vehicle had stopped. I could still hear the motorcycle, which the force of the impact had sent flying over our car to land on the road behind us. A split second later, the rider's body crashed onto the roof of our car and then fell onto the road.

We jumped out of the car and saw the crumpled motorcycle. The rider was obviously critically wounded, with blood gushing from his head. The damage to the front of our car was significant. However, the worst was yet to come. In India, whenever there is a serious road accident in which someone is injured, the local people afford the driver they perceive to be at fault no mercy. He is often dragged from his vehicle and beaten to death on the spot. The passengers commonly suffer the same fate. The vehicle is then looted and torched.

Within moments, a crowd of villagers had encircled our car. The driver had already fled, so they focused on us. My first thought was to protect my Deities, who were in a silver-colored case next to me on the seat. I saw several people already eyeing the fancy container. Grabbing the case, I opened the door and slowly got out. As I did so, Dharmātma and Craig emerged from the other side of the car and attended to the injured motorcyclist. By assessing his wounds, they gained the sympathy of much of the crowd. No doubt the fact that we were all dressed as *sādhus* also helped. Nevertheless, the situation remained tense as several villagers tried to gather a mob to attack us. Some of them even approached me, yelling loudly and pushing me backwards. I began to pray to Lord Nṛsiṃhadeva in my mind, and within moments, the agitators stopped harassing me.

As I passed Dharmātma, I told him I was going to wait by the entrance of a nearby building. Should things flare up again, I suggested he and Craig join me and we would hide inside. With my Deities in hand, I moved slowly toward the building while Craig stepped behind the car just as some men succeeded in breaking the lock on the trunk. Seizing the moment, Craig reached in and removed our luggage.

By this time the crowd were on our side, as they could see that Dharmātma was endeavoring to get the wounded motorcyclist to a hospital. All tensions subsided when the police arrived, at which point Dharmātma and Craig made their way to my side. Unnoticed by the villagers, we went in-

side. The building was a telephone exchange, and I immediately asked the one and only operator to call us a taxi. He stared at me blankly; he didn't speak a word of English. Then one of the agitators from the crowd tried to force his way into the building. Several workers pushed him back. We were just becoming nervous again when suddenly, as if by the Lord's arrangement, a *sādbu* appeared at the door, his face peaceful.

Entering the building, he moved his hands in a reassuring way. He stayed with us for over an hour. I finally managed to communicate with the operator enough to get him to call us a taxi to take us to Purī, and when it arrived, we emerged cautiously from the building as the *sādbu* scanned the crowd, his stern look keeping trouble at bay. As we waited to load the taxi, the *sādbu* noticed the small pouch I keep around my neck containing my Nṛsiṃha *śilā*. Almost mystically he concluded that the Lord was inside and asked for *darśana*. I unzipped the pouch, revealing the Lord's gaping mouth and fierce countenance. The *sādbu* bowed his head in appreciation and offered his prayers to the Lord. Then with his arms raised he indicated with his eyes that it was the Lord alone who had protected us from certain injury or death. By Lord Nṛsiṃhadeva's mercy, we had miraculously survived a major collision and a hostile group of villagers.

As we drove away, I saw Craig looking at his own representation of Lord Nṛsiṃhadeva—his ring. Meditating deeply on the ring, he turned and said, "I'll never, ever take this ring off. Lord Nṛsiṃhadeva protected us!" Despite the seriousness of the event, Craig was left only with an underlying feeling of gratitude toward the Lord. I was glad he could see it that way. It made me uneasy to think that Craig had had to go through such a terrible ordeal in India. He later told me that this was the only automobile accident he had ever experienced. Why did it have to happen while he was in India? I was trying so hard to impress upon him the wonderful life of Kṛṣṇa consciousness. No doubt it was part of the Lord's plan. Some of the most important lessons in spiritual life are sobering. I had thought that the Lord was being particularly kind to Craig during his initial steps in Kṛṣṇa consciousness—and it was now apparent that from the beginning, Craig was being taught to take shelter of the Lord in both happiness and distress. As

we had discussed earlier that day, the Lord is everywhere, within and without. Indeed, even tragedy helps bring us closer to His lotus feet.

*vipadaḥ santu tāḥ śaśvat
tatra tatra jagad-guro
bhavato darśanam yat syād
apunar bhava-darśanam*

“I wish that all those calamities would happen again and again so that we could see You again and again, for seeing You means that we will no longer see repeated births and deaths.” (*Bhāg.* 1.8.25)

27

Mullah Mahārāja

December 7–10

Alas, when will that auspicious day arrive when the actual glories of Vṛndāvana will be manifest to me? The scriptures are unable to touch even one-millionth portion of its wonderful glories. Great personalities like Lord Brahmā, Lord Śiva, Lakṣmī, Śukadeva Gosvāmī, Arjuna, and Uddhava are unable to get *darśana* of its confidential form. The *yogīs* cannot understand the glories of this land through their yogic performances. What to speak of others, even ordinary Vrajavāsīs cannot see it. Śrī Vṛndāvana exhibits her real form only to those fortunate devotees who have taken shelter of Śrīmatī Rādhikā.” (*Vṛndāvana-mahimāmr̥ta*, *Śataka* 17, text 60)

I returned alone to Vṛndāvana from our pilgrimage to Purī and Māyāpur. Craig went on to visit the site where Lord Buddha attained self-realization in Bihar and the Ganges at Vārāṇasī. I wished him well as we embraced on our farewell. I was happy that our childhood friendship had evolved into a deeper, spiritual relationship. Knowing Craig’s newfound enthusiasm for Kṛṣṇa consciousness, I had no doubt our paths would cross again.

But I had mixed feelings in Vṛndāvana. I was as attached to the holy *dhāma* as a neophyte can be, and I hankered to continue my *bhajana*, but I had accepted an invitation to visit the devotees preaching in the Middle East. I was therefore limited to only three more days in India. As I prepared to leave, I reflected on whatever advancement I may have made during the past two months. I can’t say for sure if I made much progress in purifying my heart, what to speak of awakening any genuine love for the Lord, and the glories of Vṛndāvana still evade me, but I can say that I developed a stronger desire to become a devotee and follow in the footsteps of those who have a genuine attachment for Vraja. The most exalted of such devotees is my glorious spiritual master, Śrīla Prabhupāda, who left Vṛndāvana to preach Kṛṣṇa consciousness throughout the world. The process for entering Vraja’s mysteries requires that we follow in his footsteps. Now I am

leaving, but I hope to return one day more purified in heart and thus more able to understand the truths of the transcendental abode.

My first destination was a small country on the Arabian Peninsula, which for security reasons [to protect the local devotees] I will not name. This was my first trip to the Arabian countries, and I was excited about preaching in a new place. There are not many countries I haven't visited in my twenty-three years as a traveling *sannyāsi* and the initial visit to any place is always special.

The Arabian Peninsula has been populated for thousands of years. In ancient times, the Arabs achieved distinction at sea. Ships carried goods to and from the shores of the Persian Gulf and Indian Ocean. Most of the Peninsula is desert and is one of the hottest places on earth, with temperatures often reaching 55°. But the land yields oil, which provides much of the region's income. The people of the country I was visiting are Ibadi Muslims and practice a strict interpretation of Islam. The former ruler was opposed to modernization but was overthrown by his son in 1970. The new ruler then initiated an overhaul of the country's infrastructure. Building numerous roads, hospitals, and schools (and encouraging women to become educated), he is seen as benevolent and is much loved by his citizens.

As my flight circled the capital, it was strange to see that all the buildings in the city without exception were painted the same shade of white. Later I learned that the government oversees all construction, emphasizing that each and every building has an Arabic design and is painted the same color. I found the uniform effect tasteful and attractive.

Because of the strict Islamic code, the devotees asked me to arrive in nondevotional dress. Despite the precaution, the immigration officials were still suspicious of me, most likely because of my American passport. Tensions are high in this region, so close to Iraq, which is undergoing a United Nations weapons inspection program. Unconvinced that Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein is being truthful about having no weapons of mass destruction, America is threatening invasion. The country I was visiting is accommodating toward the West, allowing U.S. aircraft to fly from its bases and three thousand U.S. troops to be stationed on its soil. Still, in this part of

the world they are dubious about American intentions, feeling that America is more interested in Iraq's oil deposits than the welfare of its citizens.

As I passed through Customs the officer in charge called me to the side and questioned me. I told him I had simply come to visit friends. Unconvinced, he asked me to open my luggage and empty my pockets. Several times he asked me to take off my baseball cap (I ignored his requests), but after scrutinizing my bags he waved me through, warning me not to eat in public as it was still Ramadan, the holy month of fasting when Muslims eat only once a day, in the evening.

Once outside the terminal, I was greeted first by the dry air and then by Vijaya Venu-gopāla dāsa and Prema-padminī dāsī. These devotees are householder disciples of Jayapātaka Swami, and they have been instrumental in running what is possibly ISKCON's most successful *nāma-bhāṭṭa* program. They have more than two thousand members in their congregation, and the congregation expands daily. Of course, the members are all of Indian or Bangladeshi origin, because the government forbids people to proselytize any religion other than Islam. Surprisingly, however, the government both allows and even facilitates foreigners' practice of Christianity or Hinduism. Oil drilling requires a large labor force, and forty percent of the population here are Indians and Bangladeshis. Thus besides several churches in the capital, there is also a Kṛṣṇa temple (with a beautiful Kṛṣṇa Deity) and a Śiva temple, both said to be over 150 years old. Vijaya told me that the country's ruler tolerates other religions because he was educated in India.

As I took in the surroundings on the way to Vijaya's home, it was interesting to see that just about everyone was dressed in traditional Arabic clothing, the men in flowing white robes with that peculiar headdress, and the women in black robes with only their faces exposed. I noticed that men and women did not mix freely. Mosques were located throughout the city, which was immaculate and had a number of beautiful parks and gardens. Vijaya told me the city was originally planned so that there would be a mosque within walking distance of any quarter.

The lifestyle seemed to reflect Islamic scripture, and this was made clear when we passed a roundabout on which stood a huge statue of the Koran with Arabic letters in the middle of its open pages. There were no dogs

anywhere, as Muslims consider dogs unclean. Only foreigners keep dogs in Islamic countries, but they are not allowed to bring them out onto the street. Whatever foreigners I saw were well dressed. The government is strict about who gains entry. Although tourism is encouraged, backpackers are prohibited. If any tourist is foolish enough to be caught carrying illegal drugs, he or she may get a life sentence—a stiff punishment that has resulted in practically no drug abuse in the country. I saw no billboards, and Vijaya said newspapers were forbidden to report on sensuous topics. Generally the newspapers in this country print only good news. Western society would consider this repressive, but I noted a calm among the citizens, part of which could be attributed to the lack of advertising and the overt absence of sinful activities like intoxication, gambling, and illicit sex.

My preaching in this country consisted mainly in giving lectures and performing *kīrtana* with our congregation at the Śiva temple, which the devotees rented for the purpose. Several hundred devotees crammed into a hall attached to the temple, where we were free to hold discourses and loud *kīrtanas*. Due to the potentially watchful eye of the internal security who monitor people’s adherence to the religious code, I chose my words carefully during the public lectures. I didn’t want to offend anyone in any way. During the lectures I often heard the mosques surrounding the temple calling the faithful to worship, and I marveled that we were able to speak *kr̥ṣṇa-kathā* and hold *kīrtana* in the midst of such a strictly Islamic society.

I also visited the “labor camp,” a congregation of Indian nationals who provide the work force for the capital. The workers, who come from all over India, are housed in simple wooden barracks just outside the city. One night, under a starry sky, I gave a class to five hundred such workers. It was translated into several Indian dialects. Then we had a rousing *kīrtana*—which must have echoed far into the desert with its clear, still atmosphere.

Each day, before leaving Vijaya’s house for the morning and evening programs, I was obliged to change into nondevotional clothing. Upon arrival, I would change back into my *dhōṭī*. Then before leaving, I would have to change again. All this changing back and forth grew tiresome after a while, so I asked if I could simply put on an *āba*, the flowing robe worn by

Muslim men, over my *sannyāsa* dress. I thought it would be easier to put on and take off than my Western garb. Vijaya and some of the congregational members were nervous at the prospect, but eventually they agreed. For the rest of my visit, whenever I went outside I dressed in a *aba*, which easily hid my devotional attire. The local Muslims found it curious and the congregation dubbed me “Mullah Mahārāja.”

Ramadan came to a close during my visit. The day after the fasting period is called Eid al-Fitr, and it is a time of festivities for Muslims. The elderly Indian women in our congregation had been begging to cook for me since I arrived but had been disappointed when I said I would eat only simple *prasādam* once a day. To please them, I suggested they cook a feast on Eid al-Fitr, and I enjoyed wonderful *prasādam* while the country’s citizens celebrated their annual festival.

Four days later, my visa expired and I left the country without incident. Once again I felt privileged to assist Lord Caitanya’s *sankīrtana* movement by traveling to a remote region of the world to spread the holy name’s glories. I would be traveling to another Arab country. What wonderful service would the Lord have for me there? My heart was beating in anticipation. I relish this life as a traveling preacher, because by serving Lord Caitanya’s mission, I am able to remain immersed in thoughts of Him.

“I took this as the special mercy of the Lord, who always desires benediction for His devotees, and so thinking, I started for the north. After my departure, I passed through many flourishing metropolises, towns, villages, animal farms, mines, agricultural lands, valleys, flower gardens, nursery gardens and natural forests. I passed through hills and mountains full of reservoirs of various minerals like gold, silver and copper, and through tracts of land with reservoirs of water filled with beautiful lotus flowers, fit for the denizens of heaven, decorated with bewildered bees and singing birds. . . . After that, under the shadow of a banyan tree in an uninhabited forest I began to meditate upon the Supersoul situated within, using my intelligence, as I had learned from liberated souls.” (*Bhāg.* 1.6.10–12, 15)

28

Last Stop in the Persian Gulf

December 11–January 11, 2003

While attempting to leave the first Middle Eastern country I visited, the immigration officials questioned me thoroughly. They eventually stamped my passport and allowed me to board the plane. On the flight I sat next to an American businessman, who expressed sympathy for the little ordeal I had just gone through.

“Forgive me if I’m too inquisitive,” he said, “but are you part of a religious organization?”

Taken by surprise, I said, “Yes, I’m a member of the Hare Kṛṣṇa movement.”

“Okay, now I understand,” he replied. “I’m from New York. I know you people, and if you don’t mind, I’d like to give you some advice. You’re too visible. That’s the reason they pulled you aside.”

“How’s that?”

“You look too happy,” he said. “I saw that at the check-in. It’s unusual. People notice. Another thing is you dress differently. Foreigners here are either doing business or in the military and dress accordingly. With your casual pants, T-shirt, and baseball cap, you look like a budget tourist.”

During the flight I reflected on his words. When I was in India I had embraced the mood of a *sādbu*, which included dressing simply and renouncing unessential possessions. Consequently, I left India with only a small bag I had purchased for 120 rupees in Loi Bazaar. It contained mostly books. But the zipper and strap had already broken and I was aware that it was attracting attention. Also, my nondevotional clothes were several years old. No wonder people noticed me in the business-oriented Middle East.

Śrīla Prabhupāda said we should use the material energy to serve Kṛṣṇa. Śrīla Prabhupāda authorized his disciples to wear nondevotional dress for preaching, but emphasized that they should look like ladies and gentlemen. I resolved that I would continue to cultivate a renunciant’s mood in my heart, but for preaching I would make the necessary adjustments.

When I arrived at my next destination, before passing through customs I stopped at a duty-free shop and bought a designer shirt and a good quality pair of pants. I also picked up a small Samsonite carry-on suitcase. I changed clothes in an airport bathroom (my belongings filled only one-third of the suitcase) and approached immigration with a sober look on my face. The officer quickly stamped my passport, and as he waved me through said, “Have a nice visit, sir.” Stopping to adjust the collar on my new shirt, I replied, “Thank you. I hope my business goes well.”

The nation I was entering is one of the most liberal in the Middle East. I read in a travel guide that it was the first country to embrace Islam after the prophet Mohammed appeared, but during the past thirty years its oil trade has exposed it to Western culture. This became apparent as the devotees who picked me up drove me to the apartment where I would stay for my three-day visit. Out the car window, I saw one of the most opulent and affluent cities I had ever seen. Beautiful hotels, parks, gardens, and high-rise apartments dotted the landscape. The roads were in excellent condition, and almost all the cars were new. Department stores were brimming with Western products, and there were McDonald’s and Pizza Hut outlets everywhere.

I hadn’t expected this. Neither was I impressed. If there is anything I’ve learned from years of traveling and preaching it’s that wealthy nations are not necessarily happier than their poorer counterparts. Last year the BBC conducted a survey to determine the world’s happiest country. To everyone’s surprise, the winner was Bangladesh. Great Britain came ninth! Happiness is not determined by material wealth.

The *Caitanya-bhāgavata* explains that Kholāvecā Śrīdhara, a poor but great devotee, had a similar realization. Once Lord Caitanya approached him and asked if he was feeling inconvenienced due to the simplicity of his life. Kholāvecā replied:

*ratna ghare thake, raja divya khaye pare’
paksi-gana thake, dekha, vrksera upare*

*kala punah sabara samana bai’ yaya
sabe nija-karma bbunje isvara-icchaya*

“A king may live in a house of jewels while a bird lives in a tree, but they pass time in similar ways, enjoying the same pleasures of life in varying degrees. Therefore, I am quite satisfied with the simple life I am living.”
(*Caitanya-bhāgavata, Ādi 12.189–90*)

Just as everyone experiences similar material pleasures, they experience similar miseries, because material existence means duality. When I remarked about the city’s opulence, one of the devotees reminded me that we were, after all, in a desert, and that temperatures often soared above 50°. Because of the heat, everyone must live almost entirely indoors in air-conditioned apartments, offices, schools, and cars. Rain is scarce. In fact, it doesn’t rain for years at a time in the Middle East. The devotees told me that when it had rained recently for the first time in three years—and the rain had only lasted for seven minutes—the entire city had come to a standstill.

“Why in the world would the city come to a halt because of a little rain?” I inquired.

“Because people were so curious to see the rain that they stopped what they were doing to go outside and look at it. Even the traffic stopped, because no one knew how to drive on wet roads. But in terms of misery, there are occasional sandstorms, which whip up in the desert and send sand flying everywhere. In cold countries, people have to shovel snow. Here, people have to shovel sand.”

After settling into my apartment I was taken to a congregational member’s home for a program. Like the first country I visited, my preaching here would consist of speaking to an Indian congregation. Even when local Muslims express an interest in Kṛṣṇa consciousness, devotees do not encourage them. They are afraid of government reprisals. At one of the programs I held in a small village in the previous country, a local Muslim farmer stopped and stared at us. That was enough to make the devotees stop the program and whisk me away. “Someone may report that a Muslim was taking an interest in us,” they said. “We don’t want to take any chances.”

The Indian families I visited and in whose homes I held programs in

the Middle East were all educated and cultured. Many were from South India, mainly Kerala, and strive to maintain their spiritual culture while away from home. Ironically, living in an Islamic society helps them in this regard. Muslim governments do not tolerate pornography, and no one is allowed to drink liquor. All Internet sites are censored and under government control. For example, I was unable to access the new devotee website (www.dipika.org) where my diary chapters are published.

The families in this country reminded me of those I met while accompanying Śrīla Prabhupāda to some of his home preaching programs in India in the early '70s. The etiquette they offered Śrīla Prabhupāda and the excellent meals they served made an indelible impression upon me. And throughout my visit to the Middle East, I often remembered Tamāl Krishna Goswami, who learned from Prabhupāda the same Vaiṣṇava etiquette when dealing with cultured Indians. I began to dream of him, and one night I awoke feeling strong separation from him. Like all relationships in Kṛṣṇa consciousness, friendships do not end at death but become ever more relevant with the passing of time. I got out of bed that night to console myself, but the pain only increased when I read Śrīla Narottama dāsa Ṭhākura's feelings of separation from Śrīla Rūpa Gosvāmī. They so much mirrored my own feelings toward Goswami Mahārāja. Narottama writes:

*tuyā adarśana-abi garale jārāla debi
cira-dina tāpita jīvana*

“The serpent in the form of separation from You has poisoned my whole body, and my life is permanently miserable.” (*Lālasā*, text 4)

I preached to the Indian congregation every day, but in the back of my mind I was wondering what Lord Caitanya's plan was for the Middle Eastern Muslims. Obviously that plan has not yet manifest, but surely the Lord will make it clear in the course of time. Just as Lord Caitanya sent Śrīla Prabhupāda to New York City at the perfect moment in American history, at a time when much of the youth, dissatisfied with material life, were seeking a spiritual alternative, the same moment will arrive for other parts of the world.

Curious to know more about Islam, I asked a devotee to drive me to a marketplace in the old part of the city. Then I walked alone for several hours. The bazaar was like something out of the Arabian Nights. It consisted of small, winding streets, ancient-looking shops, and was teeming with people. Fruit and vegetables of all descriptions were for sale, and I saw merchants displaying colorful bales of cloth, shops selling all shapes and sizes of hookahs, and of course, many stalls selling dates. I noticed one store that sold oils and perfumes, so decided to see if they sold *aguru*, the most precious of oils. I once bought some in India for my Deities, although a tiny amount was more expensive by the ounce than gold! In this bazaar I was pleasantly surprised to find the oil affordable. I purchased a small bottle and thought to myself, “For now, this may be the only way to engage these people in Kṛṣṇa consciousness—using their products in the Lord’s service.”

Thoughts of how Lord Caitanya’s mercy would manifest in the Middle East remained with me throughout my stay. As I boarded my flight back to Delhi, I thought about what a monumental achievement it would be for the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavas to spread Kṛṣṇa’s holy names freely around the Persian Gulf. Such an achievement could only be compared to Kṛṣṇa consciousness spreading across Russia. By Prabhupāda’s mercy, I have had the privilege of being part of such historic events. The risks and adventures involved in preaching in the former Soviet Union were among the best years of my life. Are there other challenges ahead? We cannot see the future, but I pray to Prabhupāda and the previous *ācāryas* that if such opportunities emerge, I will be ready and willing to serve.

*na dhanam na jannim na sundarim
kavitam va jagad-isa kamaye.
mama janmani janmaniśvare
bhavatad bhaktir ahaituki tvayi*

“O My Lord! I have no desire to accumulate wealth, nor do I want to enjoy beautiful women, nor do I want any number of followers. I only want Your causeless devotional service birth after birth.” (*Śrī Śikṣāṣṭaka*, text 4)

29

Return to Śrī Vṛndāvana-dhāma

January 12–February 6

Soon after leaving the Persian Gulf, my questions about how Kṛṣṇa consciousness would spread in Islamic countries was answered when Bhakti-bhṛṅga Govinda Mahārāja invited me back to Kazakhstan to participate in a five-day festival celebrating the end of the Prabhupāda Marathon. I had tolerated the heat of Arabia, but now I found myself bracing for Central Asia’s severe cold. I flew from Delhi to Almaty on January 14.

Central Asia lies on the ancient silk route to the Far East. This route was the trade link between China and Europe for four hundred years, up until the fifteenth century. The current inhabitants are mostly farmers who live in river valleys and around oases, although there are still some nomads who herd their livestock across the almost uninhabited tracts of land in search of fresh pastures. By the 1930s, the former Soviet Union had assimilated all the countries in Central Asia (except Afghanistan), and they remained dependent until 1991 when, with Russia, they formed the Commonwealth of Independent States. Since then, Kazakhstanis have reestablished their languages and Islamic faith, both of which had been restricted under Soviet rule.

Two of the world’s great deserts, the Karakum and the Kyzylkum, cover much of the western portion of Central Asia. To the south and southeast a belt of mountain ranges, the Hindu Kush, the Pamirs, and the Tien Shan, tower above the land. It is at the base of these rugged mountains in Kazakhstan that Mahārāja established his rural community in 1997. He called it Śrī Vṛndāvana-dhāma. At that time there was only a handful of devotees in the region, but Mahārāja’s powerful *kīrtanas* and sweet lectures enchanted people, and now the entire community, including the congregation, consists of more than six hundred devotees.

His success was not without struggle, however. After all, he is preaching Kṛṣṇa consciousness in a Muslim country. Just last year the authorities

confiscated the passports of all active devotees, threatening to jail the locals and deport the foreigners. Appealing to those sympathetic to our movement with connections in Almaty (the former capital, which remains host to all foreign embassies and Kazakhstani government agencies), Mahārāja managed to have the passports returned without complication. In the process, he developed a close relationship with the Indian Ambassador, who arranged for Mahārāja to meet the Indian Prime Minister, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, who was visiting Kazakhstan at the time. When Mahārāja mentioned the restrictions our movement experiences in Kazakhstan, Mr. Vajpayee said to the ambassador, “That’s your department. Give them all the assistance they require.”

Mr. Vajpayee’s help could not have come at a better moment, because since then, Mahārāja has embarked on a most ambitious project: the construction of the first full-scale Vedic temple in a Muslim country. Styled after a beautiful temple on the banks of Mānasa-gaṅgā near Govardhana Hill, the 5,000 square-meter building will include gardens, a lake, *gośālā*, *guru-kula*, and orchards. Mahārāja expects the project to attract tourists from all over Central Asia. The architectural design is complete, and Mahārāja already has a team of devotees raising funds. When I asked him where they were seeking their donations, I almost fell off my chair when he replied, “Mostly here in Kazakhstan—and in other Muslim countries.”

“You’re funding a Vedic temple in an Islamic country from Islamic donations?!” I was incredulous.

But Mahārāja was calm as he replied, “Yes, we even have plans to approach the wealthy sheikhs in the Persian Gulf. Why shouldn’t they appreciate such a project? It’s culture of the highest order.”

I was impressed by his determination.

The celebrations at Śrī Vṛndāvana-dhāma consisted mainly of long *kīrtanas*. Typical of festivals in Mahārāja’s preaching area, we devoted an entire day to *kīrtana*, calling it “The Holy Name Day.” We literally chanted from 7:00 A.M. until midnight. A group of distinguished visitors attended the festival on another evening. I was not informed beforehand who was coming, so when the Indian Ambassador, a prominent local mullah, the

Kazakhstan Minister of Religious Affairs, and representatives from various religious organizations were announced, I was taken by surprise. Each guest gave a short speech, pledging to support the new temple. As they spoke, I was mesmerized. By taking up the risks and challenges to preach Kṛṣṇa consciousness in a Muslim country, Mahārāja was receiving Mahāprabhu's unlimited mercy. Śrīla Prabhupāda writes in this regard, "The members of this [ISKCON] Society must always remember that if they stick to the regulative principles and preach sincerely according to the instructions of the *ācāryas*, surely they will have the profound blessings of Lord Caitanya Mahāprabhu, and their preaching work will be successful everywhere throughout the world." (Cc. *Ādi* 7.171, purport)

The mercy continued to flow the next day when Mahārāja received a call from the secretary of the wife of Kazakhstan's president. The secretary wanted to meet Mahārāja to discuss a project on which Mrs. Nazarbayev was working—a meditation course to be made available to all high schools. The secretary asked Mahārāja to write the syllabus for the course and left the contents to his discretion. I thought, "Now the holy name's glories will surely flood this land." Such an opportunity was simply another sign of Mahārāja's love for chanting the *mahā-mantra* and his ability to inspire others to chant.

My time with Mahārāja and the Kazakhstani devotees passed quickly, and soon I was on my way back to Delhi. I rarely get the association of my dearest godbrothers these days, because these godbrothers are scattered around the globe preaching Kṛṣṇa consciousness. The need to spread the movement to every town and village has forced us to live separately. But while traveling to the airport, I thought of Mahārāja and prayed I would have his association again soon. I long for the day when all of us can associate more closely in our service to our spiritual master, if not in this lifetime, then in the next.

*rāmacandra kabirāja sei saṅge mora kāja
tāṅra saṅga binu saba śūnya
haya janmajadi punaḥ tāṅra saṅga haya jena
tabe haya narottama dhanya*

“I desire the association of Rāmacandra Kavirāja. Without his company the entire world is like a desert. If I must take birth again, I would feel myself most fortunate to have his association.” (*Prema-bhakti-cāndrikā*, Narottama dāsa Ṭhākura, Chapter 9, text 18)

My return flight was courtesy of an old Russian airplane, as unclean as such planes always are and with the usually grumpy cabin crew. This was only the beginning of several awkward experiences I would have before returning to Vṛndāvana. Unfortunately, on this flight I found myself seated next to a large Kazakhstani woman and her three unruly children. The children began to fight the moment I sat down. Just before take-off, the woman asked if I would consider moving to another seat, as it would give her children more room. As unhappy as I was with the children’s behavior, I said I preferred my window seat. She then stood up and scanned the cabin. As she sat down again she announced that there was one seat available at the back of the plane. I hesitated, but then all three children began to scream and I suddenly lost interest in my window seat. Slowly rising, I moved to the back of the plane.

The flight was full of Indian laborers returning home from Kazakhstan. Some appeared to have been drinking. When I arrived at the empty seat, I was discouraged to find that it was between the aisle and the window. After placing my bag in the overhead rack, I was preparing to sit down when the man in the aisle seat screamed, “What are you doing? You can’t sit here! Sit somewhere else!”

“Sir, I have given my seat to some children. This is the only seat left.”

“There’s no way you can sit here,” he barked. “If you want another seat, sit on the floor!”

Although a few of his friends laughed, most people in the section fell silent. The Indian workers were shocked by his behavior. When the airhostess walked by, I appealed to her, “Madam, can you tell this man to let me pass so I can sit here?” But to my surprise, she ignored me.

I managed to force my way past the man and land in the middle seat just as the plane began taxiing down the runway. There was nothing he could do to stop me, and both he and the man in the window seat grumbled

and moved in their seats in a way to enhance my discomfort. Rather than confront them again, I decided to be humble. I began to chant softly on my *japa* beads. This only infuriated them, and the man in the aisle seat shouted, “Shut up!”

But I didn’t shut up. I have no shelter other than the holy names. An hour into the flight, the airhostesses began to serve meals, and when I refused the tray, the man in the window seat announced, “So, you don’t eat meat, then!”

I was about to change my strategy and become heavy when a nicely dressed man showed up in the aisle. He had been sitting in business class as I entered the plane and had nodded his head as I passed. I had responded with a smile and a “Hare Kṛṣṇa.” He had heard the commotion about the meal all the way in the front of the plane. He had come back to see if he could help. Raising his voice he said, “Leave this man alone! Can’t you see he is a *sannyāsi*? Have you no shame?”

The man in the aisle seat was about to reply when the man from business class said, “I’ll say it once more. The gentleman sitting next to you is a *sannyāsi*. If you persist in your harassment, I will notify the pilot!” This prevented further abuse. I thanked the gentleman, and as soon as things had quieted down, began chanting *japa* again. I chanted aloud for well over an hour, then finally dozed off. When I awoke thirty minutes later, the man in the aisle seat turned to me and said, “I’m sorry. I was wrong. I shouldn’t have treated you that way. You’re a *sannyāsi*. Please forgive me.”

Then the man in the window seat said, “I am also sorry. We acted improperly. Our anger got the best of us.”

I was amazed. I could only assume that the unexpected reprimand they had received had changed their hearts. Śrīla Prabhupāda once said of his fellow countrymen that regardless of how they appear, under the surface they are Kṛṣṇa conscious, and if one knows the right method to bring it out, their Kṛṣṇa consciousness can be made manifest.

I assured them, “Please don’t worry. Everything is okay.”

Then the man in the window seat rose and said, “Please take my seat.” I hesitated, but he insisted. Then the other man rose and disappeared down the aisle. He returned five minutes later with a piece of bread spread with

jam. “Here, please take this. You have to eat something.” I wasn’t hungry, but I accepted the bread and jam with gratitude.

When the flight landed, the pair retrieved my luggage for me and cleared an area so that I could get out of my seat and into the aisle without difficulty. At the baggage claim they collected my luggage and carried it through Customs and Immigration for me.

As we left the arrivals hall, I wanted to reserve a taxi to Vṛndāvana at the official taxi office, but my newfound friends said, “Don’t worry, we’ll arrange a cheaper taxi for you outside.” By this time it was after 11:00 P.M. The air was thick with fog. I considered staying in Delhi for the night. It would be risky to drive in such fog. However, my traveling companions encouraged me to get a taxi and continue on my way. I have no doubt they were sincere, but as an experienced traveler in India I should have known not to take a non-registered taxi from the airport so late at night.

Walking in the cold night air to the far end of a parking lot, we found an old taxi parked in the shadows near a dim streetlight. One of the men inquired about the fare, which turned out to be 1,000 rupees (compared with the usual 1,500 rupees). Opening the door for me and throwing my bags into the trunk, they apologized again for their behavior on the plane and waved goodbye. I was suspicious of the driver from the beginning. He had wrapped his mouth and nose in a scarf, and I couldn’t see his features. He didn’t speak much English. After reminding him of my destination, I fell asleep in the back seat.

About an hour later I woke up and was surprised to see that we were still in Delhi, driving down a dirt road in what appeared to be a poor part of town. The houses were nothing more than shacks. I sat up and said, “Where are you taking me?” The driver replied in broken English, “My brother come with us.” Because it’s not uncommon for Indian taxi drivers to take another person along with them on long journeys, especially at night, I relaxed a little. Still, I was wary of the surroundings. A few minutes later he stopped the car and got out, saying he was going to get his brother. As I waited, the fog became thicker. I couldn’t even see the shacks three meters away. When forty minutes had passed, I’d had enough and got out of the car. I noticed that the vehicle’s license plate on the front of the car was

different from the plate on the back. Again I became apprehensive. Could this be a setup for a robbery? When the dim streetlights suddenly went out, I decided not to wait around for an answer. I grabbed my bags from the taxi and walked quickly down the road we had come. When I heard men shouting behind me, I broke into a run. Ten minutes later I reached a well-lit major road, where I flagged down a taxi. As I got in the driver said, “What are you doing here?” I had been wondering the same thing.

Driving slowly through the thick fog, the taxi driver took me to a hotel near the airport. I arrived well after 1:00 A.M. When the man at the reception told me that a room cost the equivalent of \$180 a night, I hesitated, then relented, wanting to bring that day’s difficult and arduous journey to an end. While taking the elevator to the third floor I scolded myself for my stupidity. I had put myself in a potentially dangerous situation. I also thought it might be good if I had a traveling companion. Of course, a *sannyāsi* is meant to travel alone and learn to depend on God’s mercy, but he shouldn’t do dangerous things. As I settled into bed I considered Cāṅakya Paṇḍita’s sober advice:

*ekākinā tapo dvābhyām paṭhanam gāyanam tribhiḥ
caturbhir gamanam kṣetram pañcabhir babubhi raṇaḥ*

“Religious austerities should be practiced alone, study undertaken by two, and singing by three. A journey should be undertaken by four, agriculture by five, and war by many together.” (*Nīti-śāstra*, Chapter 4, text 12)

30

Bhagavad-gītā in The Undertaker's Office

February 7–March 4

I spent two days in Vṛndāvana recuperating from the close call I'd had at the hands of the bogus taxi driver in Delhi. Then I traveled to Durban. North India was experiencing its coldest winter in fifty years. South Africa was unseasonably hot. As I deplaned, I welcomed the warm summer air.

I use my annual, one-month visit to Durban to improve my health and to prepare for the intensity of the Polish tour, which is by February only months away. I began this year's routine by rising early in the morning, chanting *japa*, performing my *pūjā* to Girirāja Govardhana and my Nṛsiṃha *śilā*, and praying to Girirāja that I may always remember the sweet mood of devotional service in Vṛndāvana. I pray to my Nṛsiṃha *śilā* to purify me so I can better serve the Polish mission.

After the early morning schedule, I was going to an Olympic-sized pool near the Durban temple and swimming forty laps—exactly two kilometers—in just under an hour. Sometimes I felt uncomfortable expending so much energy caring for my body, but when I reflected how many devotees my age are falling ill or simply feeling old due to constant travel and the stress of management, I took heart. Good health is important in a preacher's life. It is said that if you lose your money, you have lost nothing, if you lose your health, you have lost something, but if you lose your spiritual life, you have lost everything.

In the afternoons I was going out to raise funds for the Polish festivals. I approached shopkeepers, office workers, and entered people's homes. Sometimes I simply met people on the streets and humbly requested donations. People often wondered why they should give money for something that was going on in another part of the world when South Africa has so many problems of its own. I replied that as a *sannyāsī* I don't discrimi-

nate between one country, race, or religion and another. I can see that everyone in the world is suffering because they do not have Kṛṣṇa consciousness. Sometimes my arguments were effective, and sometimes they were not. Begging is never easy.

Still, I was happy to be preaching on the streets. I did book distribution for eleven years between 1971 and 1982, and I attribute much of what I know and use now in my preaching to what I learned during those formative years. A *saṅkīrtana* devotee is constantly reminded of the temporary and miserable nature of the material world, and often bears witness to the amazing transformations that can come in people's lives when they contact Kṛṣṇa consciousness.

I saw such a transformation one day in Pietermaritzburg, seventy kilometers from Durban. Fatigued by the late afternoon sun, I decided to finish the day's collecting and began walking back to the car. Stopping to rest in the shade, I looked up and saw a sign above the door where I was standing. It read, "City Funeral Home." Thinking it might be a suitable place to invoke sympathy for my cause, I opened the door. I cringed as I walked into the somber atmosphere of the funeral parlor and saw the coffins and tombstones displayed. Not finding anyone at the reception desk, I peered through an office window and saw a man sitting at a desk reading a book. He was so absorbed in reading that he hadn't heard me enter. When he did see me, my saffron robes and shaved head appeared to startle him. Still, he invited me to enter the office.

As I made my way in, his attention wandered back to his book. I sat patiently for a few moments before his desk, then said, "That must be an important book you're reading."

"Oh, yes," he replied, "it's the most important book I've ever read."

Squinting in the dim light, I tried to read the title. Noticing my curiosity, he said with affection, "This is *Bhagavad-gītā As It Is*." And leaning closer, I saw the familiar picture of Lord Kṛṣṇa driving Arjuna's chariot on the cover.

"I started reading this book a year ago, just after my son died in a traffic accident," he said.

"I'm sorry to hear you lost your son," I said.

He closed the book and looked wistfully at a framed picture of the young man on the wall. “He was only twenty-two—in the prime of his life. He was a good boy.” Then looking up he said, “A year before his death he came in contact with your movement. He became a vegetarian, started chanting, and visited your temple regularly. He tried his best to get me involved, but I had no interest. I was only concerned with making money and enjoying life. As a result, we sometimes quarreled about his newfound faith. I was hoping it was temporary, something he would grow out of.

“Then one day he came home and said I should put my shoe shop on the market, because selling leather shoes brought bad karma. Can you believe it? For twenty years I had that shop, and one day he tells me I should sell it! And you know what? I sold it. Not because of the leather shoes, but because I loved my son. I decided to retire and use the money from the sale to start him in a business of his own. This funeral home was a bargain. He managed it for only a week, but then one day on his way to work he was killed. A friend who survived the accident told me that he called out Hare Kṛṣṇa in his last moment.

“I was devastated. My only son had perished, vanished from the face of the earth, ceased to exist. It was too much for me. One morning I got the strength to come down here to collect his things and close the business. When I walked into my son’s office, I saw this book lying open on the desk. There were none of the usual things on the desk—no papers or files or pens—just this *Bhagavad-gītā* open at this page. I was drawn to read it, and as I did so the words became a soothing balm to my distraught soul. I discovered that my son had not actually perished—that only his body had died. I learned that he was an eternal soul and that having chanted the name of God at the moment of death, he may well have gone back to the spiritual world.

“I no longer lament the tragedy that took him. I’m only sorry I didn’t take up his entreaties to practice spiritual life with him while he was alive. I’ve kept this business going in his memory. Being an undertaker is an unusual occupation. I don’t have to advertise. There’s always work. But many of my customers are in the same position—distraught and suffering. I share with them the knowledge I found in this book. My real business is reading

Bhagavad-gītā and chanting Hare Kṛṣṇa, like my son.”

That said, he looked down at the *Bhagavad-gītā* and began to read. I took that as my cue to leave. I didn’t ask him for a donation; I was simply grateful for the experience. I felt I had received something valuable, a deeper faith in *Bhagavad-gītā* and Kṛṣṇa’s holy name. However, as I walked to the door, the gentleman looked up and extended his hand. “Here, take this,” he said. “You can use it to get this knowledge to others who are suffering.”

I turned and accepted his offering, and as I did my eyes fell on the open page of the *Bhagavad-gītā*. It was the last verse his son had read and a source of great solace to his father. Although I had read it hundreds of times, by the Lord’s grace it suddenly meant much more to me:

*janma karma ca me divyam
evam yo vetti tattvataḥ
tyaktvā dehaṁ punar janma
naiti mām eti so ’rjuna*

“One who knows the transcendental nature of My appearance and activities does not, upon leaving his body, take birth again in this material world, but attains My eternal abode, O Arjuna.” (Bg. 4.9)

31

Favorable Winds in America

March 5–27

The war in Iraq began just days after my arrival in America for my two-month preaching tour. As a result, I found a people receptive to Kṛṣṇa consciousness. *Bhagavad-gītā* describes four classes of men who turn to God: the curious, those seeking material success, those seeking knowledge, and those in distress. Whether encountering peace activists or war advocates, I could see that almost all the Americans I met were anxious, grappling with fear, doubt, and uncertainty about what the overseas conflict would mean to them.

With America's initial missile attack on Baghdad, intended to kill Iraqi president Saddam Hussein and his closest advisors, the administration raised the homeland terrorist alert from yellow (medium) to orange (high). Consequently, the airports increased their security, obliging passengers to undergo rigorous checks. All luggage was subject to X-ray inspection, and most passengers had to undergo personal searches. This was especially true for Śrī Prahāda (who had joined me on the tour) and I, because our devotional attire attracted both attention and suspicion. As much as I advocate devotees wearing traditional clothing, I almost capitulated and put on nondevotional dress as I was singled out on numerous occasions for security checks.

However, an incident involving a security guard in charge of the luggage X-ray machine at the Los Angeles airport kept me true to my values. Arriving from India with Śrī Prahāda were two big steel trunks containing beautiful, three-foot *nim* Deities of Gaura-Nitāi. They had been carved at Ekacakrā, the place where Lord Nityānanda had appeared in Bengal. Śrī Prahāda had brought the Deities for Yajña-puruṣa dāsa and his *brahmacāris*, who oversee the preaching on the Lower East Side of New York City. As we placed the heavy boxes onto the conveyor belt before our flight

to Seattle, the first stop on our tour, the security guard's eyes lit up as he saw the unusual forms inside. I cringed, expecting an interrogation. But instead, when he saw Śrī Prahlāda and me in our robes and shaven heads, he said, "Oh, Hare Kṛṣṇa. What's in the boxes, gentlemen?"

Śrī Prahlāda answered, "God." The guard reflected for a moment, looked again at the images on the screen, then said, "But we're dealing with two figures here. People say there's only one God."

"That's true," Śrī Prahlāda said, but the Lord has many expansions. The second box is His first expansion."

That proved a little too philosophical for the official, but he smiled and waved us through without further questioning. Wondering about the source of his trust in us, Śrī Prahlāda inquired as we passed by, "Do you know about our movement?"

"Yes," the man replied. "I live in Culver City. You have a temple there. I have never been there, but I ate a sweet from there once that was cooked in ghee. It was delicious."

Pausing for a moment, he added, "Can you tell me what ghee is?"

By that time, other people's luggage had begun to move through the X-ray machine and he had to return his attention to his work. I prayed that the small service he rendered us and his question about ghee would somehow bring him back into contact with devotees, ensuring his gradual progress in spiritual life.

After a three-day visit to the Seattle temple, Śrī Prahlāda and I were at the airport on our way to board a flight to New York when we came across a booth by the walkway piled with Śrīla Prabhupāda's books. A young woman was speaking with some interested people, who had stopped to look at the books. We waited until the people left and approached the booth. The woman introduced herself as *Tapta-kāñcanī dāsī*, a twenty-five-year-old disciple of Jayapātaka Mahārāja. She told us that she had moved to Seattle a few years ago, after hearing that the people in Puget Sound were inclined toward Kṛṣṇa consciousness. She had rented a small flat, and she now traveled at 5:00 A.M. every day to secure one of the three booths in the departure lounge the airport allots to charitable organizations. She had been dedicating herself to this service now for some years, leaving herself little time

for social life. Living on the profits from her book distribution, she has been happily passing her days at the airport. A devotee can be so content simply sharing Kṛṣṇa consciousness with others.

As we settled into our seats on the plane, I told Śrī Prahlāda that I had also experienced satisfaction from distributing Śrīla Prabhupāda's books in the early years of my devotional service. If required, I could easily return to that service full-time. Carrying a book bag over my shoulder and going door to door for the remainder of my life would give me great pleasure.

We attended a ceremony in our center on New York's Lower East Side in which the large congregation welcomed the beautiful Gaura-Nitāi Deities. The event culminated in a *barināma* in Times Square attended by 240 devotees. The devotees had secured a permit to chant in an allocated spot in the middle of the square, but when we arrived we found another group occupying our area. We had no option but to take the *kīrtana* group onto the street. Because the *kīrtana* party was so large, however, and because the police and other security personnel throughout the city were on a heightened alert, I doubted we would get away with such a *barināma*. But when Yajña-puruṣa approached a group of policemen, they quickly agreed to our plan. As we began to move through the crowds, we literally took over the area. Even the bright lights, flashing neon signs, and other attractions of Times Square couldn't compete with the size of our *kīrtana* party and the enthusiasm of the devotees and groups of young people dancing with us.

Two days later in Boston, on Gaura-Pūrṇimā day, we had a similar experience. Śrī Prahlāda and I led a group of fifteen devotees in a *kīrtana* party out of the temple and into the city. This time we didn't have 240 devotees to attract attention. We didn't even have an accordion for Śrī Prahlāda to play, and the *mṛdaṅga* sounded like an old cardboard box. Nevertheless, we had the most important ingredient: the holy name. As our little band chanted through the town, people stopped and listened. I was amazed. I thought Americans were a tougher crowd and that people only stopped to listen to a *kīrtana* in other parts of the world. But even more people stopped when Śrī Prahlāda gave a short talk and mentioned the war in Iraq and how Kṛṣṇa consciousness could bring peace to the world by helping us to realize that we are all part of one spiritual family with God as our father. I saw

a few businessmen even nodding their heads. It does seem that America is ripe for Kṛṣṇa consciousness.

Back on the West Coast for on the second leg of our journey, I gave a lecture to the devotees at a festival held at the Laguna Beach temple. I said that although we are aspiring transcendentalists, aloof from the so-called happiness and distress of the material world, we cannot help but be concerned with the recent upsurge of violence at home and abroad. Our interest in these matters, however, should not be of the same nature as the interests of common people. Such people pore over reports from the front and tune into CNN three or four times a day. Instead, we should understand that war is the result of impious deeds on both sides. We should therefore tax our brains (as Śrīla Prabhupāda would say) to figure out how to spread Kṛṣṇa consciousness. We have the peace formula and therefore our message is of the utmost urgency.

We later met one woman on *sankīrtana* who was on her way to the desert to perform a vigil of meditation and fasting to stop the war. Instead, she agreed to come back to the temple with us and chant Hare Kṛṣṇa. I was happy at the end of the evening to see her feasting for peace in a spiritual context rather than fasting in another consciousness.

Devotees must take advantage of the winds that favor and assist us to spread the holy name. America should not be renowned simply for its power and wealth but because it is where Kṛṣṇa consciousness first took root in the West. The war in Iraq is an unfortunate event, but it can inspire the American devotees to preach to their countrymen.

“Fortunately, . . . the Hare Kṛṣṇa movement has come to America, and many fortunate young men are giving serious attention to this movement, which is creating ideal men of first-class character, men who completely refrain from meat-eating, illicit sex, intoxication and gambling. If the American people are serious . . . they must take to the Kṛṣṇa consciousness movement and try to create the kind of human society advised in *Bhagavad-gītā* . . . If they do so, they will be happy, and theirs will be an ideal nation to lead the entire world.” (*Bhāg.* 6.7.12, purport)

32

If Only We Continue to Preach

March 28–April 19

After the festival in Laguna Beach, Śrī Prahlāda and I continued our two-month North American preaching tour, visiting New Vrindavan as well as temples in San Jose, Pittsburgh, Columbus, and Chicago. As we finally sat at the departure gate at Chicago’s O’Hare Airport waiting for our flight to Toronto, Canada, I picked up a *USA Today* newspaper someone had left behind on the seat. I glanced through the photographs and articles about the Iraq War. United States Marines were securing strategic positions throughout Baghdad, while British soldiers from the 2nd Light Tank Regiment were patrolling Basra’s streets. Drawn to the piece about the Marines I read on, noting their courage and skill in battle. At one point, I stopped and reflected on my own time in the Marines, taking pride that in 1968 I had excelled in advanced infantry training, particularly in the use of the M60 machine gun, my preferred weapon.

Then I threw the paper to the side. “What am I doing? A *sannyāsi* being nostalgic about his former activities? *Vāntāśī!* Eater of vomit!” Embarrassed, I took out my beads and began to chant, looking around to see if anyone had noticed me. No one had. They were themselves absorbed in reading the same material.

The departure lounge was packed with people on their way to a variety of destinations, but when we boarded the plane I was surprised to find it only half full. “It seems strange,” I told Śrī Prahlāda, “that there’s hardly anyone on this flight.” Later passing through Toronto’s immigration, we understood why: “Warning! SARS in Toronto. Take Precautions.”

At least 165 people around the world have died from Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), a mysterious flu-like condition originating in southern China. The advanced stages of this disease can lead to death from

pneumonia. The illness, which has spread as carriers travel on airplanes, has infected about 3,300 people. Canada, Toronto in particular, has been hard hit with thirteen fatalities in almost three weeks and several thousand cases in quarantine. From an immigration brochure I learned that although health officials have located the viral strain to which SARS belongs, they know little about the disease other than it is spread by coming into close contact with people who have been exposed.

Our hosts, Kishore and Arlini Singh, a devotee couple I've known for years, met us outside the terminal. Originally from South Africa, they moved to Canada with their two children six years ago. Kishore, a doctor, works in a Toronto hospital. On the way to their home, Kishore told me that SARS had forced most hospitals in the city to close for everything but emergencies. He also said a number of schools had been closed.

I said, "Well, there's not much danger for us. You're a doctor. What department do you work in?"

"The emergency ward."

"Oh," I said, beginning to feel trepidation. "Have you seen any SARS cases?"

"I've attended to several patients exhibiting symptoms of SARS," he said, "but it's a strange disease. You can't be sure it's SARS until the advanced stage, and by then you've been exposed."

"Interesting," I said, fidgeting.

The next morning we went to the Toronto temple, a former church built in 1896 and acquired by the devotees in the late 1970s. There is a similar church on the opposite side of the street. The churches originally marked the city's border and were known as The Gateway.

About forty students and their professor from a nearby Catholic school were visiting the temple and I gave a short lecture on Kṛṣṇa consciousness. The kids listened attentively for about five minutes, and then I lost them. Speaking to students is one of my favorite services, but I was tired from five weeks of traveling around the U.S. and perhaps a little rusty. I hadn't spoken to a group of students for more than a year. I hoped something in my talk would affect them. Each time I deliver a lecture to new people, I reflect on how after millions of births these people are finally getting the oppor-

tunity to hear about Kṛṣṇa. My presentation could, in effect, determine if they will be inspired to inquire further or lose interest altogether. A traveling preacher bears a great responsibility.

“A *sādbu* like Vidura is meant to awaken such blind persons [like Dhṛtarāṣṭra] and thus help them go back to Godhead, where life is eternal. Once going there, no one wants to come back to this material world of miseries. We can just imagine how responsible a task is entrusted to a *sādbu* like *ātmā* Vidura.” (*Bhāg.* 1.13.23, purport)

The students had no questions, so I introduced *kīrtana*. As Śrī Prahlāda began to chant, to my astonishment all the students got up and started to dance. After the program, many of them came forward to express their appreciation. I concluded that their initial reluctance was simply because Canadians are more reserved than Americans.

That evening we did a home program in Scarborough, the home of many local gangs and one of the areas most affected by the SARS outbreak. Despite these hellish conditions, the couple who hosted the program have created what can only be described as an embassy to the spiritual world in their home. They have a large temple room and a beautiful altar. On the altar stand six-foot marble Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa Deities. I began my lecture early, and watched with amusement as each guest who entered the temple room gasped at the sheer size and beauty of the Deities. While taking *prasādam*, the woman of the house told me how the Deities had appeared in their home.

About seven years ago, an Indian man living in Scarborough ordered a set of Deities from India. A week after They arrived, he died. His elderly and somewhat senile mother thought the Deities caused her son’s sudden death. Angrily, she had some local workers place Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa on the front lawn in the sub-zero Canadian winter. A concerned friend informed our hosts about the Deities and suggested the couple bring Them to their home. Arrangements were finalized over the phone, and the couple went to pick up the Deities. That’s when they discovered that the Deities weighed two tons! The couple had to order a truck to transport Them. As they wheeled the Deities into their home on a heavy-duty dolly and with the help of numerous family members and friends, they became afraid the Deities would fall through the floor of their wooden house. Soon after

they began to worship Them, their business began to prosper, and within a short time, they were able to build a new home with a temple room for their Lordships.

On one of our days in Toronto, Śrī Prahlāda and I took some time to rest and catch up on correspondence. As we sat in the Singhs' lounge, I looked out the window and noticed that few people were walking the streets. When I mentioned this, Kishore said that most people living in suburbs spend the day at work in the city. He rarely saw his neighbors except on weekends when they tended their gardens. He then related a story that demonstrates the irony of material existence.

Three months ago, a welder was working in the house across the street when a spark from his blowtorch set the place on fire. Soon the house next door was ablaze, and then the next one. The owners of the third house were to be married the next day and had not even moved in. They had just finished redecorating the house, and had even placed their wedding presents in a neat pile in the living room. But the building burned down. The fire department arrived in time to save the house, but the fire hydrant on the street hadn't been connected to the water system—the city had planned to do it the day the newlyweds were to have moved in. The story reminded me of a Bengali song: “Because of a great desire to have all happiness in life, I built this house. But unfortunately the whole scheme has turned to ashes because the house was unexpectedly set on fire.” (quoted in *Bhāg.* 3.5.2, purport)

Śrī Prahlāda and I answered our e-mail and made our phone calls. Much of my work was already focused on this year's Polish tour, now only weeks away. Nandinī and Rādhā-sakhī-vṛndā, I knew, had been working all winter to secure a base from which we could organize our festivals. As expected, they had met both friends and foes. Once again, it seemed the Catholic Church would be campaigning against our desire to preach Kṛṣṇa consciousness.

However, recently there have been indications that the barriers may be coming down. Last month there was a conference at Krakow University in which several speakers said that groups like ISKCON should not be referred to as sects or cults but as new religious movements. Some liberal-minded Dominican monks were among the speakers. The Dominicans

have always considered ISKCON an enemy and have led much of the country's anti-cult activity, but at the conference some suggested that propaganda about new religious movements needed to be studied carefully since the adverse statements about anti-cult groups cannot be confirmed.

Although the Dominican presentation does not represent Church policy, I am encouraged that we will ultimately prevail if only we continue preaching. What does it mean for us to prevail? We simply want to win the hearts of the masses for Kṛṣṇa. I often remember Śrīla Prabhupāda's statement: "First they will laugh at you, then they will harass you, and finally they will accept you." In America during the movement's early days, people thought the devotees were cute and laughed at them. It wasn't until the mid 1970s that the problems with the anti-cult groups began. Now more than ever I find that Americans are open to Kṛṣṇa consciousness. Unfortunately, there are not many senior preachers around to take advantage of such an opportunity.

I am waiting for the day when our opposition in Poland will be silenced and people will be able to take full advantage of the mercy we are trying so hard to give them. In the meantime, we have to remain vigilant. Even though our foes may try to thwart us, I am hankering for this year's festivals to begin. In *Bhagavad-gītā* Kṛṣṇa says that He is "flower-bearing spring." For me, spring means the renewal of Lord Caitanya's *saṅkīrtana* movement, a chance to introduce Kṛṣṇa consciousness in a dynamic way to the people of Poland, be they friend or foe.

"If one sincerely tries his best to spread Kṛṣṇa consciousness by preaching the glories of the Lord and His supremacy, even if he is imperfectly educated, he becomes the dearest servant of the Supreme Personality of Godhead. This is *bhakti*. As one performs this service for humanity, without discrimination between friends and enemies, the Lord becomes satisfied, and the mission of one's life is fulfilled." (*Bhāg.* 7.6.24, purport)



About the Author

Indradyumna Swami is a traveling preacher in the International Society for Krishna Consciousness. He joined the movement in 1971 in Detroit, Michigan, and soon after went to Europe to help establish Kṛṣṇa conscious centers in France, Switzerland, Italy, and Spain. In 1979 he accepted the *sannyāsa* order of life (becoming a renounced monk) and in 1986 began preaching in Eastern Europe and Russia. He continues to oversee the development of the movement there, as well as to give guidance to his disciples around the world. For the past twelve years he has also organized a large festival program in Poland that introduces Vedic culture to hundreds of thousands of people. Traveling extensively in many parts of the world, he happily shares his experiences and realizations with others in the form of this diary.